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THE NATIVITY IN ENGLISH POETRY.

City University of New York, Ph.D., 1976
Literature, English

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THE NATIVITY IN ENGLISH POETRY

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1976

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

May 5['] 76
date

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Preface

The following study is devoted to the history and analysis of the Nativity theme in English poetry, a theme hitherto inadequately investigated by literary historians or scholars of devotional verse.* Yet it is an extremely rich literary subject that has proved susceptible to a variety of celebrated poetic interpretations, from the medieval "I Syng of a Myden" and John Milton's "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity" to W. H. Auden's "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio." I hope to show in detail how the Nativity theme has evolved from the Middle Ages through the 17th century and to chart the major characteristics of that history from the 17th century to the present. I shall also examine what appear to be the fundamental features of this body of poems and determine what aspects of the theme are influenced by cultural and intellectual currents. In investigating this pivotal theme in religious poetry (pivotal because it is a primary nexus between art, dogma and the community of believers, and because it is a continuously popular theme in literature), my work has assumed the character of a literary history; for although these pages will focus on a small corpus

*The only study I have found which deals directly with the theme in English devotional poetry is Rosemary Woolf's short Appendix on the Nativity theme (The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, Oxford, 1968, pp. 302-306). But Woolf's treatment is cursory, dealing only in broad generalizations with the poetry and limited to the medieval period.

Other works deal with the historical development of English Christmas verse, loosely termed "carols" by the authors. Among them I have used Erik Routley, The English Carol (Oxford, 1959); and Douglas Brice, The Folk-Carol of England (London, 1967). These works generally cover the same time period as my study; yet their method is unscholarly and parochial, and the authors seem mainly interested in festive, trivial Nativity lyrics set to music rather than the major and serious literary works I have emphasized in my study.

of poems united by subject matter, the theme gives as a "window" through which to view the meaning, function and direction of the larger body of English devotional poetry.

The poems on the Nativity offer a felicitous paradigm for devotional verse as a whole. Many of the major constituents of religious poetry are clearly present in Nativity verse: the Biblical substructure that forms the doctrinal foundation for the poetry; the area of personal religious experience and ingenuity provided by the poet-dévot; the historical and intellectual factors which govern the "hermeneutics" or Biblical interpretation affecting the theme in every age. But the theme possesses something more than other poetic topics drawn either from the Scriptures or from the dévot's personal religious moods: because the theme is rooted firmly in the vivid birth narratives in the Synoptic Gospels, it has a cohesiveness and consistency throughout its evolution. One hears and recognizes an unmistakable tonic note in all the main variations and permutations through the centuries. Yet the Nativity and the symbolic ideas contained in the theme (God's humanity, man's divinity) are remarkably rich and, within limits, are adaptable to the contemporary secular philosophies of every age.

From my study, it becomes clear that the Nativity plays a sustained and particularly significant role in English literary history, exceeding those of other religious themes more limited to specific historical eras, like the medieval Passion. Its development appears to mirror that of vernacular devotional verse as a whole: the Nativity theme arises and takes its fundamental popular and dogmatic shape in the late Middle Ages; it inspires the majority of great English poets during the 16th and 17th century, the periods which produce the most brilliant examples of devotional verse; even from the end of the 17th century to the present, when devo-

tional poetry is closer to religious polemic or light verse than to belles-lettres, the theme retains its visibility and viability and surfaces into English poetry in more secularized or ecclesiastical forms.

In Nativity poems of all periods, the poems are both structured by Scripture and are a means through which Scripture is illuminated and interpreted. The centrality of Biblical writings to this theme further suggests the very special nature of devotional poetry as opposed to secular verse: the judgments involved in reading devotional poems follow from the presuppositions of the believing community and not solely by the diction and intrinsic structure of the literary works themselves. These "presuppositions" derive from the dogma or the teaching of the church, i.e. the "church" or sect espoused by the poet himself.

In the Middle Ages, the interpretation of the Bible is left to a small body of learned clergy and preaching friars, and the individual layman's faith is primarily influenced by the common experience of the Catholic liturgy and mass. Nativity poems directly mirror this communal, impersonal and didactic elucidation of Scriptures by the medieval doctrine regarding the naturalism and historicity of the infant Jesus, and, in particular, the reading of the Gospel birth narratives as a record of human suffering.

In succeeding centuries, the direct and naturalistic interpretation of the Gospel records of Christ's life is gradually broken down. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the attenuated medieval tradition is rejuvenated to some degree by Southwell, Donne, Herbert and Crashaw, who treat the familiar figure of the human babe in the crèche. Yet the commendatory, social verses of Jonson and Herrick substitute secular, contemporary features for traditional details in the Biblical birth narratives, and

thus illustrate the dissolution of the literal truth of the Gospel stories.

What finally undermines the communal, naturalistic symbols of the medieval Catholic church is the Protestant emphasis on the dévot's private interpretation of the Bible without the intermediary elements of priest, liturgy, hymn or meditation, the primary channels through which the Holy Scriptures had formerly been interpreted and communicated to the layfolk. The result of the Biblicism of the Reformers Luther and Calvin is a proliferation of allegorical readings of the Gospels. These versions of the Nativity, beginning with the Nativity poem of Erasmus early in the 16th century, offer "purified", apostolic interpretations of Scripture often interlarded with antique myths. The individual, allegorical re-tellings eventually usurp the realistic versions of the Nativity generally favored by the Catholic church. The concept of the Incarnation is almost an embarrassment for a poet like the Puritan John Milton. In Milton's "Nativity Ode," Christ's divinity is exalted, and the birth narratives become the "fiction" through which a majestic, omnipotent God chooses to battle and to defeat Satan and his hordes. In Henry Vaughan's Nativity lyrics, the battle between Christ and Satan is seen to occur in the dévot's own soul, and the common medieval experience of interpreting the Scriptures as an objective record of Christ's real suffering is discarded for a radically new and private religious mythology.

By the 18th century, the erosion of belief in the historicity of Jesus Christ is accelerated by philosophes and Deists who consider the Gospel records of Christ's life fanciful allegories and superstitious myths. At the same time, the direct and miraculous intervention of God in human history is replaced by the notion of the transcendent, cosmic "clockmaker." Here, at the height of the "golden age" of Protestant

hymnology, devotional poetry in England begins to sink in artistic quality, perhaps because two basic elements in devotional verse, the Biblical foundations and the feeling of personal contact with the deity, are undermined. Thereafter, in the 19th century, the lack of popular interest in Biblical stories seems to affect the general recession of Nativity poems. One even senses the occasional poet's hostility to traditional interpretations of Biblical themes, as in the case of William Blake's radical repositioning of Nativity motifs in the opening lines of Europe. What is more telling, perhaps, is the secular poet's virtual ignoring of the religious foundations of the theme of sacramental birth or incarnation, as in the case of William Wordsworth in "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality."

Nativity poems once again appear in English literature in the 20th century with the blossoming of Biblical studies in all fields of modern Christian scholarship, beginning with the historical studies of Albert Schweitzer, and continuing with the Biblical scholarship of Rudolph Bultmann and Hans Conzelmann, the systematics of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, and the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in ethics and the social sphere. The English and American poems on the Nativity combine dogma with 20th century concerns and suggest a new realism in portraying the birth that in some respects hearkens back to the naturalism of the Middle Ages.

The evolution of Biblical interpretation from the 14th through the 20th centuries not only signals the transformation of the Catholic, naturalistic and didactic view of the theme towards personal, original poetic insights with less reliance on the Bible, but also a concomitant change in the portrait of Jesus himself. In the medieval Roman tradition,

Christ as suffering infant is a salient image of the medieval view of salvation through penitence and pain. Yet in the 17th century, Christ becomes a remote and kingly figure associated with the redemptive, apocalyptic theology of the Protestant sects. After the 17th century, Christ is transformed into an abstract, transcendent historical force. In developing my notion of the centrality of Biblical hermeneutics to literature, I have depended on the insights provided by Gerhard Ebeling's Word and Faith, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963, repr.), a basic work in the history of Biblical interpretation. In documenting the Christological development in Nativity verse, I have been influenced by the reading of two seminal modern works of theology -- Gustav Aulen's Christus Victor (New York, 1931), a work which charts the motif of the redemptive Christ of the Atonement throughout church history, and Anders Nygren's Agape and Eros (New York, 1939), which examines the interacting forces of love (agape and eros) and law (nomos) since the Greek fathers. Both studies employ the method known in theological studies as "motif research," or the studying of theological history through recurrent and pivotal patterns of ideas. Although both, from a scholarly perspective, tend to be schematic and theoretical, each one yet offers broad and basic insights regarding the changes in the figure of Jesus Christ (Aulen) or in the values and attitudes of the believing community (Nygren) which I have found particularly useful and applicable to the devotional poetry of England.

Apart from the central question of determining the direction and meaning of the evolving Nativity poem in literary history and the roles that Biblical hermeneutics and Christology play in measuring that change, one additional sidelight to my study is the question of what is fundamental to devotional verse in general and what is limited to particular historical

contexts. Christian doctrine itself is a flexible and fluctuating area subject to historical and cross-cultural influences. One cannot study these Nativity poems, therefore, solely through the religious precepts espoused. Rather, devotional themes, of which the Nativity constitutes one enormously significant example, may be subject to other than Christian or even religious interpretations.

For example, the Nativity theme embodies motifs of cosmic renewal, animism and familial and vegetation symbols associated with cyclical rebirth in man and in nature that may well occur in similar combinations in other literatures of different historical periods. Virgil's "messianic" eclogue is one significant classical "nativity" poem which by chance exerted an important influence on English Nativity poems. Wordsworth's "Ode" is a further example of a non-Christian "nativity" work which may not belong to a Christian context but which utilizes the same combination of pastoral and maternal images common to poems on the Gospel birth.

The important devotional theme of Christ's Nativity, then, can well be seen as possibly a universal motif existing in poetry of other cultures, but having a unique and brilliant history in the devotional verse of post-medieval England and governed primarily in this area by the interpretations of the Gospel Nativity stories by poets in each age.

Chapter One

The Middle Ages

The theme of Christ's Nativity, a rich and enduring topic in English devotional poetry, first enters vernacular literature in the mid-14th century,¹ and, by the end of the 15th century, becomes a major poetic theme in Middle English religious verse. These first English works on the Nativity lack the more spectacular literary excellence of the lyrics on Marian or Passion themes, yet they constitute a sizeable and noteworthy body of late medieval English poetry.

Aside from Rosemary Woolf's brief appendix on medieval Nativity verse in The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages,² there has been little scholarly attention paid to the development of the Nativity theme in medieval verse. Despite the numerousness of Middle English works on the theme, most medieval scholars have chosen to emphasize other religious themes like Christ's Crucifixion or Mary's Joys or have viewed the theme as a minor motif in the medieval lyrics. My aim in this chapter is to elaborate and extend Woolf's rather limited treatment and to establish in particular the enormous richness and variety of medieval Nativity verse, a topic hitherto unexplored in studies of the Middle English lyric.

Since the majority of medieval Nativity poems are in the stanza-burden form of the English carol, a poetic form arising out of Anglo-Norman love poetry, they have been conventionally treated as part and

parcel of English carol literature as a whole, that is, as a small group of religious poems developing out of older, secular verse. Yet I hope to affirm the artistic integrity of these medieval Nativity works, and to suggest especially that the Nativity poems are primarily characterized by their essential theological foundations, notably by their didacticism and proximity to the Scriptural accounts of Christ's birth and infancy in Matthew and Luke. In my estimation, these works are a large, variegated grouping of instructional, ecclesiastical material designed by the medieval "clerc"³ to inculcate in entertaining fashion a knowledge of the Bible to the general populace.

Yet for all their similarities in general poetic form and didactic intent, the medieval Nativity poems are an eclectic body of verse incorporating the wide range of channels through which the Scriptural Nativity was dispensed to the populace in the Middle Ages --- the Christmas and Advent liturgy and hymns from the Latin rite; the songs and sermons of itinerant preaching friars; the medieval religious drama; vernacular meditations on popular late-medieval topics such as the Passion; devotions to Mary and her Joys; and superstitions deriving from the Apocrypha elaborated upon by the commonfolk.

On the basis of didactic purpose, the Scriptural sub-themes concerning the Nativity, and the various poetic forms that each didactic interest generates, I have divided the medieval Nativity poems into five main groups, differing in artistry and form, which will be the basis for my discussion of this period in Chapter One. The three groups producing the least interesting and least influential works are 1) the vernacular hymns or sequences treating the Nativity as Johannine mystery or Patristic Verbum Infans; 2) the carols narrating sections of or the entire Nativity story

from the Gospels and which teach Christ's accessibility through stark Biblical history; and 3) the Nativity songs and ballads which offer the irreverent, often bitter view of Christ as flawed and human. The two categories which encompass the most literary Nativity works are 4) the lullaby carols which teach that Christ is a suffering, mortal deity and 5) the courtly romance carols dealing with Mary's pivotal role in the redemption of man. In these latter areas, the medieval poet achieves a natural, spontaneous tone, and although the elucidation of medieval dogma concerning the birth of Christ is still the poet's paramount concern, the artfulness of the poet is clearly apparent.

As the above categories indicate, there are many poetic versions of the medieval Nativity story. My first chapter will attempt to prove, however, that the multiplicity of interpretations regarding what was considered canonical in the medieval church regarding the Biblical Nativity story and the uneven quality of these poems suggest that the works are not an integrated, unified body of poems but a random assortment of several streams of devotional verse united by a common, Scripturally-based theme and didactic purpose. Not only do they range from formal, tendentious sententiae or versified philosophical tenets appropriated from the Greek and Latin Fathers to the low-life songs of shepherds, but they also enter tangentially the circles of aristocratic courtly love poetry in their depiction of the Virgin as a compelling, desirable figure in the Nativity drama. Their ideological and stylistic diversity also points out their truly universal nature, in that they are directed to all ranks of men, including aristocracy and clergy, as well as to the commonfolk.

In recent years, several ground-breaking studies of the medieval religious lyric, of which these Nativity poems constitute an important

percentage, have attempted to emphasize the poetic artistry with which the medieval cleric conveyed a complex body of religious doctrine to his lay congregation and, in part, to clarify the thorny question of the inter-related religious and secular contexts in these lyrics. Studies by Sarah A. Weber, Peter Dronke, Stephen Manning, Rosemary Woolf and Raymond Oliver have investigated the various backgrounds of these works in the liturgy, hymns, meditations and communal celebrations of the Roman Catholic church and have expertly shown how English theological or social matrices or European literary contexts govern the artistic choices made by the medieval poet in imagery, style and form.⁴ As a result of these recent seminal studies, the medieval religious lyrics have been shown to be important, eclectic, artistically interesting works of this period, worthy of more critical attention than afforded by E. K. Chambers, who, early in this century, casually dismissed the lyrics as "a mass of verse of no great moment."⁵

However, as my examination of the 5 main categories of medieval Nativity verse will show, one must approach very cautiously the question of the literary achievement of these first vernacular Nativity works. At their very best, in some of the "lollais" in John of Grimestone's 14th century commonplace book or in the incarnational lyric "I Syng of a Myden," we find a vitality and grace that derive from a poetic that valued brevity and directness and an attempt to humanize their religious subjects. Yet even these excellent poems have a commonplace, domestic air and lack either strong feeling or rhetorical sophistication, when compared to the many brilliant Middle English lyrics on the Passion. Especially when seen in relation to subsequent developments in Nativity poems in the 17th century, the medieval Nativity works appear to be neither the most ideologically

significant nor the most artistically engaging samples of English devotional verse. Rather, they seem to be a modest stream of ecclesiastical, Scripturally-oriented works feeding into the whole of English religious poetry. Their didactic, communal nature governs the stylistic features exhibited by most of the poems: the anonymous tone and absence of well-developed personae; the frequent references to public, congregational forms of worship such as the liturgy; the simplified, objective presentation of material in short stanzas frequently containing mnemonic devices such as refrains or Latin tags; the appeal to the audience's pity and love for the Virgin and child, emotional responses associated with the common experience of the eucharist. Generally, these works are more concerned with inculcating dogma than with utilizing the poet's creative faculties to the fullest, and hence, as George Kane has observed, they are often unappealing to the modern reader for whom originality and personal feeling count as primary poetic criteria.⁶

In spite of their small scope, they are poetically valuable and interesting, nevertheless, because they perform distinctively within a limited, homiletic framework and because, when viewed from the perspective of literary history, they comprise a significant body of popular, didactic verse. But for a few notable exceptions such as John of Grimestone's lengthy lullabies or the enigmatic and formally idiosyncratic "I Syng of a Myden," most of the Middle English poems on the birth are in the carol form; moreover, these Nativity works constitute the major proportion of carols in the 15th century, the era in which most medieval carols were composed. Indeed, the evolution of the Nativity theme in the Middle Ages is inextricably bound up with that of the medieval English carol, a poetic form whose mixed secular and religious origins have been the subject of much recent scholarly dispute.⁷ Since the issue of the carol's source

is not crucial to my discussion, I have chosen to let the matter rest and to use the term as it was probably conventionally understood in the late Middle Ages --- as a form in folk poetry generally taking the shape of short stanzas plus an added refrain and incorporating to a large extent Christmas themes.⁸

These medieval Nativity works determine the outlines for Nativity poems to come. The simple, naive, narrative lyrics offer realistic accounts of the Biblical Nativity story which later poets writing on the theme would continue to embody or interpret in their own works. Put simply, the medieval lyrics on Christ's Nativity are a modest but essential part of a vast body of doctrinal works in Latin and English on the Nativity theme. It is upon this important foundation that devotional poets writing on the theme in the 16th and 17th centuries would build grander, more aesthetically complicated edifices.

I

The least interesting and influential medieval works on the Nativity theme are those which are closest to the ancient Catholic tradition of Latin hymns, sequences, or sententiae. These poems in themselves offer little in the way of literary interest. Yet they are worthy of consideration in any history of religious verse, for they offer valuable evidence of a strong and continuing link between Latin church poetry and vernacular Christmas verse. Most of the poems of this category have clear ecclesiastical origins. I have grouped them in the following fashion: English translations of hymns or liturgical formulae concerning the Nativity, Annunciation or Advent and which date from patristic times; dignified, symbolic treatments of the Virgin as mother influenced by Latin hymns dating from the 12th century Victorine worship of Mary; ecclesiastical verse in the Wisdom tradition arising out of the clerical Disticha Catonis or out of Scholastic casuistical works.

The predominantly prosaic, theological and dialectical features of these Latinate Nativity poems are revealed especially well in a small group of 15th century carols belonging to the category of aphoristical Wisdom verse mentioned above. These argumentative carols describe the mystery of the Incarnation, the idea through which the medieval Latin church interpreted the Nativity of Christ and a major theme in many patristic hymns, sermons and prose tracts.⁹ These works tend to be philosophical works displaying a cleric's awkward and heavy hand at versifying.

Because these carols are dialectical and philosophical rather than narrative and dramatic and tend generally to deal with the Patristic con-

cept of the Verbum Infans, the silent infant Word, rather than the naturalistic Bethlehem tableau of the Synoptic Gospels, they appear to be markedly different from the major body of 15th century Nativity carols. Recognizing their thematic departure from the Christmas carol "norm," Carleton Brown excluded these works from his section of Nativity carols in his anthology of 15th century religious verse and classified them rather ambiguously under the heading "mysteries of the faith."¹⁰ Yet these poems are indeed Christmas poems in their own right, for they attempt to amalgamate the philosophic exercises of Latin casuistry into the narrative carol form and frequently allude to the episode of Christ's birth in the stable. Generally, however, these attempts to yoke patristic theology with the stanza-burden carol form are not poetically successful. Rather, they are incongruous, stilted academic exercises in which stanzas containing weighty "doctryne" is linked uncomfortably with less formal, "mirthful" refrains for the purpose of rendering the difficult concept of the Word-made-Flesh understandable and palatable to the commoner's tastes.

In one of these philosophical carols, for example, an awkward attempt is made to instruct the unlettered audience on the mysterious duality of Christ and the miraculous virginity of his maid-mother. Rather than employing the traditional symbols out of the Bible or liturgy to evoke metaphorically the concept of the Incarnation -- the Virgin as tabernacle, as enclosed garden, her womb as sun shining through glass -- ¹¹ the medieval cleric attempts to investigate the doctrine through rational discourse. The poem's stanzas set forth problems in which spirit overcomes matter in various events from the Bible -- the creation of the world, the creation of Adam and Eve, the Nativity of Christ -- while the refrain attempts to answer the dévot's puzzlement by proclaiming faith in the unfathomable

wisdom of God. The poet erects a pseudo-logical structure out of each separate problem: each event from the Bible is posed in the stanzas as a riddle which goes unanswered since it is insoluble by reason and proof of God's hidden knowledge. After having incited the kind of dangerous curiosity that led Adam to test God's dictum, the poet then excoriates man for being "in fanyt" or infirm of wit and challenges man to "yev wholl credens" to God who operates on principles of faith rather than on human logic.

Whym what ys þis? why, hit ys
Non nodyre sekurely but weritus were-by domini, (refrain)

Tell me is resoun, yeve þat þu cane,
how goddys sone be-came a mane
be lynnag of dawyt and nassone?

Man, þu art but corrypbtull,
Tell me how hit may be possibull
That he schall lyue euer, as sayth þe bybull?

Man, þu art but in fanyt
To comprehend nor to indyte
All þis matters se in sennyt.

God hym-selfe byddytt vs by his senttens
To so vse owre resoun and owre efydens,
And to his wordys yef wholl credens.¹²

Like the above philosophical carol, many of the poems of this Latin-based category abound in verbal play and frequently adopt the forms of puzzles, riddles or acrostics. Many depend heavily, too, on traditional religious symbols in which the concept of the birth as Incarnation or mirabilem mysterium is conveyed to the congregation. Basically, what is characteristic of all poems of this ecclesiastical grouping, from the lofty and allegorical to the terse, colloquial and aphoristical, is the strong air of religious polemic. A further example of polemical Nativity verse with an obvious connection to the Patristic notion of Verbum Infans and to Latin church verse in general is a 15th century macaronic translation

of the Prosa de Nativitate Domini in which familiar theological symbols evoking the mystery of the birth and the duality of the infant abound.¹³ The Virgin birth is described in the vernacular version as a miracle involving both maid and mother; Christ is referred to as a king demeaned to a birth in an ox's stall and as a magical "sunne" that never sets; the manifestation of Christ on earth is rendered symbolically by the descent of the "cedar of Lebanon" into a valley and as the sun shining through glass, both references to the Incarnation occurring, respectively, in the Song of Songs and in the Catholic liturgy. The overall didactic function of the macaronic poem is especially clear from the concluding stanzas: these abandon the awkward metaphorical language for a review of the Old Testament prophecies of Christ's birth and for a stern exhortation to unbelieving Jews who refuse to acknowledge the Messiah's birth. The lines make clear in plain, argumentative language the official, unadorned dogma of the Incarnation and urge its acceptance by the audience as an important article of faith.

Glad & blithe mote ge be,
All that euer y here nowe se,
Alleluya!

Kynge of kyngs, lorde of alle,
Borne he is in oxe stalle,
Res miranda.

The angel of consel, now borne he is
Of a maide ful clene y-wys,
Sol de stella.

The sunne that euer shynet brygt,
the steere þat euer zeueth his lygt,
semper clara.

Rygt as þe sterre bryngth forth his beme,
So þe maide here barn teme,
pari forma.

Nother þe sterre for his beme,
noþer þe maide for here barne-teme,
ffit corrupta.

The cedar of liban, þat growyth so hye,
 vnto þe ysope is made lye
 valle nostra...

Unhappy iewe come þu nere,
 By-leue ellys thyne eldere,
 Why wolt þu, wrecce, y-dampned be
 Whomme techeth þe letter?
 By-holde the childe þe better--
 Hym bare a maide, moder, marye.¹⁴

All of the poems of this category, to my mind, appear to favor the interpretation of Christ's birth not from the perspective of the realistic Gospel records of Christ's life but from that of the more mystical book of John, the document upon which the Greek and Latin Fathers dating from Irenaeus depend most heavily for their prose expositions of the Nativity. This basically theological orientation is what sets these poems apart from the main body of naturalistic Nativity verses. And thus, these strongly derivative and ecclesiastical works are far less lively or spontaneous in tone than many of the carols and lullabies arising out of the native English devotion to the humanity of Jesus from the 13th century on. One can consider this small body of verses as a remnant of a far older tradition of incarnational Latin hymns or educational proverb material which probably diverged from the growing tastes for visual drama or homely realism of the popular late medieval audience in England.

II

Far less liturgically oriented and less uniform in tone than the philosophical Nativity verses we have just considered are the 15th century carols dealing with the historic event of the birth itself and the events directly following it, the Epiphany, the Massacre of the Innocents. Like all other Nativity poems of this period, these historical carols are didactic works teaching, as most of the Nativity carols do, the validity of Christ's real presence on earth. Yet these narrative carols attempt to teach the populace about the personhood of Jesus Christ by teaching Biblical history as well. They generally take the form of the historical récit, yet are different in kind from the other, more literary examples of Nativity carols, the narrative lullabies like Grimestone's "Als I lay": the lullabies, I believe, take as their narrative model the chronological recitations of Christ's last days from the canonical Hours of Christ or the prose meditations on the Passion and hence teach the macabre message of the Nativity's forecasting of Christ's Crucifixion.¹⁵

On the other hand, it seems to me that the narrative Nativity, Epiphany and Herod carols treating the birth, infancy and childhood of Christ have another, less pessimistic model and are based instead on the dispassionate accounts of the Nativity in St. Matthew and on the dramatizations of these accounts in the medieval mystery plays.

The historical carols are generally not the best examples of medieval Nativity verse. They are a stylistically uneven group of poems far more limited in subject matter and style than the other category of Nativity poems treating Biblical history, the lullabies. Because they exhibit an absence of emotionalism and a tendency toward plain statement, they appear to be chiefly modeled on St. Matthew's starkly factual and comprehensive

account of the Annunciation, magi's visit and Massacre of Innocents. Yet the poems display an interesting variation of approaches to the Biblical events surrounding the birth ranging from the melodramatic, lowlife scenes inspired by the medieval Nativity drama to the formal, restrained historical narrations of Christ's birth and childhood influenced by earlier Latin Nativity hymns.

One category of historical carols which deserves mention is that which focuses on the Epiphany, a theme originally related to the Nativity but which gradually came to assume an independence of its own because of the event's popularity in medieval drama and art.¹⁶ In one prototypical 15th century Epiphany carol, the sequence of events following the Nativity from St. Matthew is carefully elucidated, so that not only the appearance of the star to the wise men is treated but Herod's treachery and events as distant as the Annunciation as well. As in Matthew, the actual cradle scene and Nativity is de-emphasized and instead the human characters coming to bear witness to the birth are brought into the foreground. The clerical composer meticulously describes the magi's journey and goes on to catalogue the details of their actions, where they kneeled, how they made their offerings. What is presented is a lively and scrupulously factual account of Biblical history and a recreation of the verisimilitude of the magi's travels.

The ster he schynythe bothe nyzte & day,
To lede iij kingis þer Ihu lay.

Ihu whas Borne in Bedlem Iude,
Alle off a mayden, so fyndyth whe.
Owte off pe Este com kyngis iij,
Whyte ryche presente as Y yow say.

The stuarde whas Bolde off þat contre
And Bade Errod scholle come and see
lyke as þey wentyn, all þe iij,
Goyng ffurthe yne þer Iornay.

ffurthe þey wentyn, pas for pas,
 And euer þe ster schone one þer ffase,
 lyke as þe sone dope throw þe glas,
 And yne to Bedleme þey toke þer way.

Whene þey com yne-to þe plas,
 Ihu whythe hys modyr whas,
 þey knelyd a downe & made solas,
 And euer kyng tyll oder gan say--

When þey had made yp hyr offeryng,
 gollde and myr and ryche thyng,
 they lay a downe & toke restyng,
 ffor alle a nyzte and alle a day.

As þey lay in þer slepyng
 Ther come a angell & browzte tydyng,
 And Bade theme wende nat hy errod þe kyng,
 But Bade þeme take a-nother way.

Errod off þis he wyxed fful gryll,
 þa þis iij kyngis Cam nat hyme tyll,
 Alle to fful-ffyll hys false wylle,
 And tyll hys knyptes he gane say--

Errod Bade hys knyptes a-none
 That þey scholde in-to bedleme gone
 And sle þe chyllderyne every-chone--
 And yet he faylyd off hys pray.

Angellys Come owre lady a-none,
 And bade hyr in-to Egypt gone,
 ther-yne to wonne, þer yne to dwelle:
 yne tyme hyt wer errod-ys endyng day.

Herrod dyyd and went to hell.
 þer yne to wonny, þer yne to dwell,
 And yne þe depyste pytte he fell--
 And þer he ys ffor euer & ay.¹⁷

Without embarking on a lengthy examination of the Epiphany theme, I feel that some consideration of these Epiphany and Herod carols is necessary, for they reveal the unmistakable entry of popular, pictorial motifs from the ballads and mystery plays into the carols concerning the birth narratives.¹⁸ For example, the above poem's second stanza depicts the figure of the Bold Steward, a character out of ballad lore meant to signify treachery. Also, the poem's description of Herod's wrath in learning

of the magi's betrayal, his threatening of his knights, their dispassionate slaying of the children and Herod's end in hell appear to me to be familiar details consciously appropriated from the medieval miracle plays such as the Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors of Coventry or the Massacre of the Innocents from the Chester cycle.¹⁹ The Epiphany carol's borrowings from the religious drama suggest the common purpose of both carol and religious play: both attempted to teach Biblical history to the common-folk through vivid, naturalistic, pictorial scenes, often through the creation of stereotypical buffoons and villains like the wicked Vice-figure Herod.

Aside from the lively historical carols concerning the Epiphany and Massacre which inculcated Biblical history through the use of low-life characters and scenes from the religious plays, there are a large number of more stylized and formal carols like the lyrical "Honnd by Honnd," treating Biblical history and centering on the Nativity proper which are also connected with the medieval drama. Together, they form a considerable proportion of medieval carol literature and offer strong evidence of the carol's existence as what E. K. Chambers earlier in the century termed, "the lyric counterparts of the miracle plays."²⁰ Chambers' contention has been affirmed by the work of a recent scholar of both the carol and the religious drama, William Phillips, who has observed that Nativity carols were sung between acts for entertainment and gradually became integral in the scenes and parts of the action itself.²¹

It is obvious to me that a great number of the historical carols treating the Nativity scene itself are intimately connected to particular scenes in the miracle plays, although the connection is not nearly so overt as that in the Epiphany and Herod carols. In particular, certain phrases

self-consciously describing the carol-singers' traveling during the course of the song as a group suggest the possibility that these Nativity carols may have been composed from the point of view of the Bethlehem shepherds journeying to or from the cradle site "making known abroad the saying which was told to them concerning the child."²² Yet the theatrical dimension of these Nativity carols, to my mind, seems to be a rather late, super-added element. If one takes the works out of their presumed dramatic context, it is clear that the historical carols treating the Nativity proper are unmistakably formal, ecclesiastical church works originally deriving from the centuries old tradition of Latin historical Christmas hymns which include celebrated Latin works by Ambrose, Sedulius or Philip the Chancellor.

I have observed that like their earlier Latin models, the great proportion of the dignified, hymn-like historical carols centered on the birth in Bethlehem rehearse the unadorned scenes of the Nativity as set forth in Luke and Matthew without bringing home, as the more somber lullabies do, the relationship of Nativity to Passion or the potential pathos of the scene. They also appear to avoid the emotional excesses and strong, vivid characterizations of the more low-life Herod and Epiphany carols. Instead, most of these hymn-like historical carols evoke a calm sense of festivity and intellectual pleasure in the birth through the use of ecstatic refrains and simple, rhymed stanzas. Many of these carols are macaronic, incorporating tag lines from the Latin hymns into the fiction of the birth and frequently combining staid Latin verses with lively, colloquial renditions of traditional material.²³ Primarily, however, most hymn-like historical carols prefer to retain the reverent tone, lack of thematic depth or characterization and the impersonality of the Ambrosian Christmas hymn. The early carol

"Honnd by Honnd," for example, restricts its discussion of history to the exposition of the birth event only and avoids the dramatic and stylistic touches of the lullaby or Epiphany carols.

Honnd by honnd we schulle ous take,
 & ioye & blisse schulle we make,
 for þe deuel of elle man hagt for-sake,
 & godes sone ys maked oure make.

A child is boren a-monges man,
 & in that child was no wam;
 þat child ys god, þat child is man,
 & in þat child oure lif bygan.
 Honnd by honnd panne schulle ous take,...²⁴

As exemplified by "Honnd by honnd," these hymn-like historical carols, in spite of their lack of complexity, exhibit a directness, an evangelistic fervor and a simple, ecstatic expounding of the bare fact that "godes sone ys maked oure make" that makes them especially good for convivial though formal congregational singing. This was probably their main use by the "clerics" who adapted and composed them in the 15th and 16th century, for they make up a large percentage of the major carol collections in the Sloane and Bodleian manuscripts.

None of the hymn-like carols reciting Biblical history makes for imaginative or memorable literature. Yet I believe that they are an interesting step in the development of the ecclesiastical congregational hymn, directly linking the Latin Ambrosian tradition to the later Protestant Christmas hymns of Wesley and Watts in the 18th century. Also, these carols demonstrate the persistence of a substantial vein of doctrinal, didactic congregational verse meant purely for impersonal, formal and public musical praise of the deity.²⁵

Although the artistic achievement of these historical carols treating the Nativity and the events subsequent to it is a modest one, this category

contains the largest number of medieval Christmas poems. The relatively large percentage of historical carols suggests, too, that these were among the most familiar, well-loved and well-used of medieval Nativity poems. Certainly the background of these poems tends to bear this observation out: it would appear that they stem from a much older, formal body of Latin hymns which came to be adapted very successfully to the contemporary idiom and popular drama of the medieval layfolk.

III

The Nativity theme takes on the characteristics of comic or light verse in the carols and ballads which utilize extra-Biblical folk tales and ancient Apocryphal legends surrounding the birth and infancy of Christ. In addition, these works draw from the same body of popularized Gospel material as do the historical carols discussed previously. Yet the familiar Nativity sub-topics so favored by the commonfolk in the religious drama and their carol counterparts become only the beginning point in these ballads and folk carols for imaginative episodes independent of Scripture which were designed to satisfy the public's taste for dramatic color and theatricality as well as to provide edifying illustrations of dogma.

Taken as a whole, these works are the least pious and most informal of the poems we are considering in this era. The bulk of the folk ballads and carols were composed in the early years of the Renaissance by minstrels or itinerant and worldly clerics and are early examples of a vein of irreverent, often ironic vernacular religious verse centered on the Holy Family and drawing from old Apocryphal texts which, like the "Cherry Tree Carol" or "The Bitter Withy," persisted far into Victorian times in rural English communities. It would not be farfetched to surmise that a close connection exists between these folk poems and the medieval mystery plays, for the poems seem to derive much of their characterizations from the low-life scenes in the religious drama.

Yet at their best, these folk poems are didactic as well as entertainingly and refreshingly amoralistic. In spite of their vivid and humorous portrayals of Jesus, Mary, Joseph and other personages associated with the Nativity story, the doctrinal implication of these folk poems is

enormously apparent. What these naturalistic, often irreverent pieces taught was the message that Jesus was decidedly human, even to the point of being flawed and sinful. My observation concerning the incipient didacticism of these misleadingly lighthearted works is supported by the recent scholarly theory by Erik Routley that many Nativity ballads were originally part of a song-cycle composed by preaching friars and based on legends from the Apocrypha for the instruction of children.²⁶

The Nativity carols and songs sung through the persona of the humble shepherd were especially popular in the 15th and 16th centuries because they appeared to offer homegrown approximations of one of the most esteemed Renaissance literary genres, the pastoral eclogue. Yet their real source is often the buffoonish shepherd of the medieval miracle plays rather than the "gentil" rustic of Bion or Moschus. The vitality and naturalism of the shepherds of these carols and ballads again point to the possibility that these poems are not intended as separate lyric works but, like most of the narrative carols on the Nativity, are compositions which may well have originally been integrated with the episodes and characters from the religious drama.²⁷

The strong dramatic dimension I have observed in these Nativity carols and ballads as a whole is especially visible if one looks at the folk carols dealing with the shepherds. In the Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors of Coventry, for example, there is a two-stanza carol which infuses a good deal more animation into the story of the shepherds than is depicted in the Gospel of Luke. Where the angelic epiphany is described as an event of great seriousness in Luke, in the 15th century carol, their visitation is depicted as a time of great merriment for the shepherds. Nor is the angels' descent from heaven so threatening or frightening an episode as

it is in St. Matthew. Rather, the angels are themselves described in the carol as if they were a crowd of human merry-makers going on a wassail: they appear to the shepherds as a "great company" singing with great mirth. The "terly, terlow" of the refrain itself has affinities in phrasing with the "troly loly lo" or nonsense musical sounds of refrains from amorous spring songs or pastourelles in secular French poetry.²⁸

As I out rode this enders night,
 Of three jolly shepherds I saw a sight,
 And all about their folds a star shone bright;
 They sang terly terlow;
 So merrily the shepherds their pipes gan blow.

Down from heaven, from heaven so high,
 Of angels there came a great company,
 With mirth and joy and great solemnity,
 They sang terly terlow;
 So merrily the shepherds their pipes gan blow.²⁹

Another, widely popular shepherd carol from the early 16th century is the "Joly Shepherd Wat" which employs a great amount of low-life material from the medieval Nativity dramas. Wat is fashioned in the unidealized image of other shepherds such as Mak of the Townely plays; his concerns are mundane and his language, appropriately, rude. He appears to have a very ordinary, realistic personality: he possesses all the everyday accoutrements of the actual working shepherd, dog, flagon of wine, dress, drum, even pipe, and is startled from his sleep by an unwelcome angelic visitation. The poet adds small, clever details which show the Nativity scene through the crude and humble perspective of Wat. Wat draws no delight in seeing either the angels or the Holy Family. Instead he notices particular, often devastating features that show the average layman's reaction to a mystical vision. The fright of the credulous and unlearned shepherd is conveyed by Wat's putting his "hand under his hood" to stay his heart when witnessing the epiphany of the angels. He describes the Bethlehem star as "red as

blood" to indicate its awesome attraction to him. His opinion of the Holy Family is reduced to that found in the plays and ballads: he sees mother and babe in an intimate embrace familiar to the layman from the Nativity lullabies and theatrical cradle scenes; whereas by contrast, Joseph is shown as a shadowy, insignificant personage who goes unnoticed except for the cut of his cape. Wat's rather patronizing recognition of Joseph alludes to the caricature of Joseph as jealous cuckold from the Apocrypha and Nativity ballads. There are other additions of rusticity or touching crudeness to Wat's character as well: as Wat climbs to Bethlehem, he sweats. And as he leaves for his journey, his main worry is for his sheep and his dog whom he speaks to with great seriousness and concern. The gifts he gives the infant are practical representations of his trade, and the speech to the child, unlike his speech to his dog, is functional and perfunctory and bare of softer emotion, at the very least.

Can I not sing but 'Hoy,'
 Whan the joly shephard made so much joy? (refrain)

The shephard upon a hill he satt;
 He had on him his tabard, and his hat,
 His tarbox, his pipe, and his flagat;
 His name was called Joly joly Wat,
 For he was a gud herdes boy.
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

The shepard upon a hill was laid;
 His dog to his girdell was taid;
 He had not slept but a litill braid,
 But 'gloria in excelsis' was to him said.
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

The shepard upon a hill he stode;
 Round about him his shepe they yode;
 He put his hond under his hode,
 He saw a star as rede as blode.
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy...

'Now farewell, Mall, and also Will!
 For my love go ye all still
 Unto I cum again you till,
 And evermore, Will, ring well thy bell.'
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

'Now must I go there Christ was born;
 Farewell, I cum again to morn.
 Dog, kepe well my shepe fro ye corn,
 And warn well 'Warroke' when I blow my horne!'
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

Whan Wat to Bedlem cum was,
 He swet, he had gone faster than a pace;
 He found Jesu in a simpell place,
 Betwen an ox and asse.
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

'Jesu, I offer to thee here my pipe,
 My skirt, my tar-box and my scribe;
 Home to my felowes now will I skipe,
 And also look unto my shepe.
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

'Now farewell, mine owne herdes man Wat!'
 'Yea for God, lady, even so I hat;
 Lull well Jesu in they lape,
 And farewell, Joseph, with they round cape!'
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.

'Now may I well both hope and sing,
 For I have bene at Christes bering;
 Home to my felowes now will I fling.
 Christ of heven to his bliss us bring!
 Ut hoy!
 For in his pipe he made so much joy.³⁰

The naïve giftgiving and leavetaking of Wat, which recalls the trivial gifts of Mak in the farcical Townely Second Shepherd's Play, is a popular and sentimental feature indicating the simplicity of the ordinary but virtuous rustic in response to the divine event that is visited upon him. Such a characterization injects humor into the stylized, static cradle tableau and demonstrates the fun with which the commonfolk viewed the

holiday. Wat's song also suggests that the infant Christ, for whom his amusing gifts are intended, was an accessible, commoner's God, and one who understood and appreciated the easy intimacy and buffoonish generosity of his people.

In their homiletic, popular and communal form, most Nativity carols eventually were phased out in the 16th century when professional musicians at the Tudor courts took over their composition from the clerics. Thus the Nativity carol in its late medieval form was turned into ornate, festive musical pieces for courtiers who attempted to imitate the simple diction and homely vitality of the original. Surprisingly, long after the medieval doctrine concerning the humanity of the infant Christ had ceased to predominate in Nativity verse, the strong hedonistic element present in extra-Biblical low-life carols like "Joly Shepherd Wat" and some of the Epiphany carols which utilized folk superstitions continued in a subsidiary form in English poetry. These festive, folk interpretations survived poetically in the religious ballad, a form which continued in popularity far into the 19th century in remote parts of the English countryside, long after popular doctrinal verse of the medieval variety had passed out of the mainstream of English poetry.³¹ Some of these Nativity ballads, occurring in various versions dating from the 15th to the 19th centuries, cast a jaundiced though affectionate eye at participants in the Nativity story.

Such is the case with the "Cherry Tree Carol," a ballad with a continuing popularity among the countryfolk and found in various versions from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The original source for the ballad as a 15th century carol entitled, "Mervel not, Joseph," in which the Apocryphal tale of Joseph's jealousy is rendered in the burden and the more intellectual elucidation of the mystery of the Incarnation set forth in

the stanzas.³²

In Child's version of the ballad, which dates from the early 16th century, however, the medieval carol's burden has become the focus of the ballad's narration. The small detail in St. Matthew concerning Joseph's puzzlement over Mary's pregnancy and his brief consideration of divorce is turned into an instance of human folly and marital misunderstanding in the Nativity ballad. Child's versions of the ballad draw upon the story of Joseph's jealousy as it was portrayed especially in the mystery plays and originally in the Apocryphal book of Pseudo-Matthew, main sources for many of the humorous features and vegetative symbols concerning the Holy Family that eventually found their way into the religious ballads.³³ The ballad uses the comic portrayal of the unusual triangle found in the medieval mystery plays and depicts Joseph as the medieval layman knew him through these dramas and Apocryphal legends -- as a typical cuckold, old and rather foolish and married to a young and comely bride. In a humorous twist of doctrinal material, the poem shows Christ's instructing the rather cruel Joseph just as the Crucifixion dialogues and Nativity lullabies frequently presented the wise infant instructing a grieving mother on the details of her son's future. All the major versions of the ballad are didactic rather than objective and make explicit the connection between Christ's role as instructor in the Crucifixion planctus and lullabies and the infant's rebuke to Joseph from his mother's womb. All major versions quoted by Child, as in this early Renaissance version, end with Christ's poignant description of his subsequent death on the cross.

Joseph was an old man,
And old man was he,
When he wedded Mary,
In the land of Galilee.

Joseph and Mary walked
 through an orchard good,
 Where was cherries and berries
 So red as any blood.

Joseph and Mary walked
 through an orchard green,
 Where was berries and cherries,
 as thick as might be seen.

O then bespake Mary,
 So meek and so mild:
 'Pluck me one cherry, Joseph,
 for I am with child.

O then bespake Joseph,
 with words most unkind:
 'Let him pluck thee a cherry,
 that brought thee with child.

O then bespake the babe,
 within his mother's womb:
 'Bow down then the tallest tree,
 for my mother to have some.'

Then bowed down the highest tree
 unto his mother's hand;
 Then she cried, 'See Joseph,
 I have cherries at command.'

O then bespake Joseph:
 'I have done Mary wrong;
 But cheer up my dearest,
 And be not cast down.'

Then Mary plucked a cherry
 as red as the blood,
 Then Mary went home
 with her heavy load.

Then Mary took her babe,
 And sat him on her knee,
 Saying, my dear son, tell me
 What this world will be.

'O I shall be as dead, mother,
 as the stones in the wall;
 O the stones in the streets, mother,
 shall mourn for me all.

Upon Easter-day, Mother,
 my uprising shall be;
 O the sun and the moon, mother,
 shall both rise with me.³⁴

In these Nativity ballads, not only the characters surrounding Christ were seen as real individuals with laughable human foibles. Christ, too, was occasionally given a less than godly face. This is seen in another important religious ballad, "The Bitter Withy" or "As it fell out one May morning," less well-known than the "Cherry Tree Carol" to modern readers but popular among the countryfolk for several centuries. The poem does not deal with the Nativity proper but with the early childhood of Christ and his tutorial relationship with Mary, a relationship which the lullabies examine to a large extent. The portrait in this ballad is an interesting, naturalistic one: here Christ is shown to be a naughty, frisky child set upon by his playmates and scolded for cowardice by his shrewish mother. In a version dating from the 16th century, Christ vengefully causes the children's deaths and is thrashed by Mary.

As it fell out on a high holiday
 When drops of rain did fall, did fall,
 Jesus ask'd of his Mother Mary
 If he might go and play at the Ball.

"To play at ball, my own dear Son,
 It's time you're going or gone,
 But let me hear of no complaints
 At night when you come home."

Sweet Jesus went down to yonder town
 As far as the Holy Well,
 And there He saw as fine children,
 As ever tongue can tell.

"I say God Blesse you every one
 Your bodies and souls pray keep,
 Little children shall I play with you?
 And you shall play with me?"

"Oh nay, oh nay, that must not be,
 And oh nay, that must not be.
 For we are all lords' and ladies' sons
 Born in bowers all."

Jesus made a bridge of beams of the sun,
 And over Jordan went He.
 And there followed after the three jordan,
 And drowned the three, all three.

And its upling corns and downling corns,
 The mothers of them did whoop and call,
 "Oh Mary mild, call home your child,
 For ours are drowned all."

The Mary mild called home her child,
 And laid it across her knee,
 And with a rod of bitter withy
 She gave him thrashes three.

O the withy, the withy, the bitter withy,
 Which caused my back to smart!
 The withy shall be the very first tree
 To perish at the heart.³⁵

In spite of their diverse, comic treatments of religious material when seen in late medieval contexts, the Apocryphal Nativity ballads emerge as irreverent but nevertheless pious works. For example, even the most irreligious portrait of Christ and Mary, the "Bitter Withy," must have had a doctrinal intent, if we accept the allegation that it was originally part of a larger poem based on the Apocryphal Pseudo-St. James used by Franciscan friars for the edification of children. This ballad, as do all the Nativity ballads of medieval origin, contains an ethical precept even through negative example -- generosity, mercy, the danger of revenge -- and is never meant as a rejection of the Virgin or the Christ child.

As A. Horton ably contends in his study of the Apocryphal infancy legends, the Apocryphal stories, too, were recognized for their piety in the first Christian centuries during which they were composed. Horton points out the influence of Gnosticism and Zoroastrianism upon these early texts, and shows how these stories intended to illustrate through the child's ruthlessness and arrogance the co-existent, natural forces of evil and good in the world.³⁶

Yet aside from their general didacticism and their obvious source in the Christian Nativity theme, they are, to my mind, at one remove from verse that I consider "devotional" by definition; that is, verse that treats specifically Scripturally-based themes and embodies in some fashion the contemporary formulation of Christian dogma. Assuredly, a good many of these attractive, sometimes morally ambiguous works stem from a "tradition" parallel to the canonical one: in the case of the Apocryphal ballads like the "Bitter Withy," the tradition of folk tales surrounding the character of the homicidal Jesus is an ancient one indeed. Yet neither the winsome, low-life shepherd-songs, nor the Nativity ballads based on extra-Biblical legends seem to shed any real light on Christian doctrine. The shepherd-songs treated here seem more connected with the medieval and Renaissance fool than with the laconic and detached shepherds described in Luke. In addition, the ballads based on Apocryphal legends focusing on Christ's malevolence or on the strife within the Holy Family contained material which was enormously popular in the Middle Ages, yet they were deemed officially improper. Though they may have been acceptable in the centuries in the early church which were hospitable to various contending philosophies, medieval men apparently enjoyed these legends for different, more earthy reasons.

These works seem to me to maintain very well a fragile link between devotional and secular verse. They offer vivid, contemporary portraits of Biblical characters and situations and employ ancient legends as a "glass" through which commonplace, decidedly mortal emotions may be illuminated and relished.

IV

In the whole of medieval vernacular poetry on the Nativity, probably the most moving, craftsmanlike works are the lullaby songs and carols dealing with Jesus' birth as the historic, realistic cradle scene outlined in Matthew and Luke. These lullabies far excel the more ecclesiastical or theatrical works we have just considered in reflecting the contemporary religious climate in England, especially the strong monastic movement which had begun in the 12th century. In a body of religious verse in which the preservation and inculcation of existing dogma are primary concerns, I find these lullabies to be decidedly original and unusual, for the very reason that they break with the longstanding ecclesiastical tradition regarding the Nativity of Christ. There appears to be a conscious attempt on the part of the clerical authors of the lullabies to dissociate the lullabies from the mainstream of dogma on Christ's birth, especially from the Hellenistic concept of the Logos, a cerebral, philosophical view of the Nativity which held sway in the medieval Catholic church for many centuries. The lullabies instead seem to re-direct the already well-developed poetic devotion to the crucified Christ, inspired by the popular 12th and 13th century movement begun by Franciscan and Cistercian friars in England, toward a new literary channel -- the poetic devotion to the suffering, newly born Jesus, portrayed as a miniature Man of Sorrows.³⁷

Although all the Nativity poems of the Middle Ages are influenced in some fashion by the enormously popular late medieval cult of the suffering, human Christ, the cradle songs or lullabies to Christ in the manger exhibit this influence most strongly. The lullaby carols, composed by Franciscan monks for their lay congregations, are plain-speaking, homiletic works

reflecting the general preoccupation of 14th and 15th century society with death, a theme which was widely explored by the art and literature of the period. They teach overall the lessons of life's harshness, of death's proximity and especially the martyrdom of Christ, a crucial symbolic event for medieval man, since the Passion perfectly illustrated the theme of the Ars Moriendi, the manual on the "art" of dying well.

These 14th and 15th century religious lullabies do not, then, descend from the long, well-developed tradition of Latin hymns and prose tracts on the Nativity. Instead, they appear to be a direct outgrowth of the more recent and widespread Cistercian and Franciscan devotion to the Crucifixion. The connection between lullabies and the worship of the Passion is especially clear in that there are unmistakable links in the poetry with Franciscan prose and poetic meditations on the Passion, with dramatic crucifixion formulae in the liturgy, and in particular with the vernacular planctus or complaint dialogues between the crucified Christ and his sorrowing mother.³⁸ One can also see a more general thematic connection between these morbid Nativity lullabies and the predominant strains of popular moralistic verse, the melancholy de contemptu mundi poems and ecclesiastical satires, which had dominated religious verse in the two centuries preceding the first appearance of Nativity lullabies in the late 14th century. All the lullabies show the tendency among the clergy and layfolk, especially after the ascendancy of Franciscan mysticism, to visualize Scriptural topics relating to Christ's life as preparation for death and in relation to the agony of Christ on the cross.³⁹

The lullabies achieve greatest popularity in the 15th century when they primarily assume the carol form. These carols adopt many features from the Latin and vernacular crucifixion dialogues -- the dramatic confrontation

between grieving Virgin and suffering Son; the "complaint" form generally placed in the mouth of the Virgin; the technique of historical narration, as in the liturgical Hours of the Cross or as in the meditations of the Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux. The exploration of the sorrow felt by the naturalistic mother and son in the lullaby carols was served not only by these liturgical and meditational Passion motifs but partially by the pessimistic vein of earlier secular lullabies which also influenced these religious lullabies and drew upon the popular theme of memento mori.

The precursors of these numerous death-oriented lullaby carols, are the early lullabies scattered throughout the commonplace book of John of Grimestone in 1372. These appear to be stanzaically and metrically more uneven than later lullaby carols and lack the appropriate burden, yet they often surpass the later works in powerful, graphic descriptions of the infant. The didactic end of these morbid lullabies is made clear from Grimestone's own organization: Grimestone, an obscure Franciscan friar, probably intended the work as a "storehouse of pulpit material," since his Latin prose works are meticulously arranged alphabetically in sermon topics and the vernacular verses inserted under appropriate headings.⁴⁰

In describing the suffering, martyred newborn Christ, Grimestone's lullabies touch strongly upon themes of human mortality and decay. Scholars of the medieval religious lyric have often noted the connection between Grimestone's "Lullay, lullay litel child/ child reste þe a þrowe" with a secular lullaby from a manuscript in Leominster Abbey in Kildare, Ireland.⁴¹ The secular "lollai" is in the classical tradition of de contemptu mundi, which dominated much of medieval verse, and is colored by a loosely elegaic tone of pessimism and personal contrition.

It is clear from textual evidence that the monk of Kildare who composed

this human lullaby intended that his audience understand the poem's moralistic, non-Christian rationale: the poem specifically refers to the classical notion of the vanities of life (a notion probably enriched by the medieval man's remembrance of the Biblical vanities theme), for in one of the manuscript versions the verses are illustrated with a drawing of the Roman goddess Fortuna's wheel. There are also striking resemblances to another poem circulating in French and Latin on the activities of Lady Fortuna.⁴²

In the graphic, physically tangible suffering of Jesus in Grimestone's "Lullay," there is reflected the more general social or economic suffering of the human child in the Leominster manuscript.

Lullay, lullay litel child, child reste þe a þrowe,
 Fro heyze hider art þu sent with us to Wone lowe;
 Pore & litel art þu mad, vnkut & vnknowe,
 Pine and wo to suffren her for þing þat was þin owe.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, sorwe mauth þu make;
 Þu art sent in-to þis werd, as tu were for-sake.

Lullay, lullay litel grom, king of alle þingge,
 Wan i þenke of þi methchef me listet wol litel singge;
 But caren i may for sorwe, þef loue wer in myn herte,
 For suiche peines as þu salt drigen were neuere non so smerte.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, wel mauth þu crize,
 For þan þi bodi is bleyk & blek, sone after sal ben drize.

Child it is a weping dale þat þu art comen inne,
 Þi pore clutes it prouen wel, þi bed mad in þe binne;
 Cold & hunger þu must þolen as þu were geten in senne,
 & after deysen on þe tre for loue of al man-kenne.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, no wonder þou þu care,
 Þu art comen amonges hem þat þi detz sulen gare.

Lullay, lullay litel child, for sorwe mauth þu grete,
 Þe anguis þat þu suffren salth sal don þe blod to suete;
 Naked, bunden saltu ben & seipen sore bete,
 No þing fre vp-on þi bodi or þine sal be lete,
 Lullay, lullay litel child, it is al for þi fo,
 Þe harde bond of loue longging þat þe hat bunden so....⁴³

Here, in this religious lullaby, one can see secular, sociological parallels to the Franciscan preoccupation with Christ's personal suffering

and death. If the Leominster lullaby is evidence of the common medieval notion of the harshness of human childhood and the incipient decay that birth introduces to the human being, it is obvious that the harsh, unlovely birth of Christ and his painful death were doctrines that were re-enacted by the individual dévot in his own life as well as on religious occasions.

The medieval layman would well recognize, then, the vanitas message that the friar was teaching in these early Nativity lullabies, since he himself accepted the view of human childhood as a preliminary miniature stage of adult suffering and preparation for death, rather than as a separate, more innocent phase of human development.⁴⁴ It is interesting to compare Grimestone's "Lullay" not only to the secular Kildare lullaby but to other secular lullabies later in the Middle Ages. In one particular 15th century poem, the tender maternal scene is turned into the infant's own harsh address from the cradle. The view of childhood's real agony is vastly increased from the 14th century human and religious lullabies: the child meticulously catalogues the physical decay his body will undergo in death. And, in spite of the rather mechanical religious tag at the end, there is no real release from the cycle of death described by the child.⁴⁵ Rather, the secular memento mori lullaby seems to continue well into the 15th century independent of Grimestone's introduction of devotional themes into the lullaby tradition and persists in its stark, pagan presentation of mortality and the transitoriness of life.

Grimestone's Nativity lullabies are fundamentally different from the secular lullabies in that they teach another, Christian doctrine, the hopeful doctrine of the felix culpa. Sorrow in anticipating Christ's death, then, is always proportionate to the joy taken in Christ's resurrection

after death. Although Mary, in Grimestone's "Lullay" speaks sorrowfully of her infant's future on the cross, the last stanza shows her complete understanding and acceptance of that death: "it is al for oure owe gilt þat þu art peined sore," says she, thus rising above her pain as a human mother and underscoring the validity of her son's martyrdom on the cross. The felix culpa theme, the first sin of mankind turned by Christ into the spiritual rebirth of all men, is affirmed and connected not only with the scene of the Passion but with the tender cradle scene in Bethlehem. The lullaby's reference to Christ as second Adam, though very brief and undeveloped, offers still a way out of a human world dominated only by never-ending woe. Here the Nativity lullaby transcends the sadness of the stoic, human child faced with the irreversible forces of Fortune: the friar-composer of Grimestone's lullaby is, in the final words of Mary, proposing a worthwhile act of adoration by which the apprehension of Christ in pain becomes a positive, pleasurable devotion.

...Lullay, lullay, litel child, litel child thin ore!
 It is al for oure owen gilt þat þu art peined sore;
 but wolde we get kinde be, & liven after þi lore,
 & leten senne for þi loue, ne keptest þu no more.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, softe slep & faste
 In sorwe endet eueri loue but þi at þe laste.⁴⁶

Unlike the pessimistic, secular memento mori lullabies, the religious lullabies of Grimestone's collection grasp the unpleasant details of human suffering with enjoyment because these details are connected with the person of Christ. Interestingly, in addition to lullabies, Grimestone's commonplace book contains a large number of Crucifixion lyrics in the vernacular. When Crucifixion and Nativity poems are placed side by side, the doctrinal and linguistic connections between Nativity and Passion traditions are unmistakable. Frequently sections from the Passion liturgy or hymns are appropriated directly for use in the lullabies, thus indicating that the friars

who composed the Nativity poems of this anthology intended to instill the same emotion of pathos via the Nativity theme as was associated with the devotion to the crucified Christ.

The lullabies of Grimestone's collection are especially influenced by the medieval meditations on the cross in terms of the physical descriptions of Jesus' suffering and in the poet's perception of that suffering as an act of mystical adoration. In Grimestone's previous "Lullay," for example, the poet describes the child bound to his suffering state in an attitude of "loue-longging," a term referring primarily to Christ on the cross as an object of religious devotion. The dessication of Christ's body in his projected death is also graphically described in the lullaby: his body is depicted in the manner of Gothic crucifixion paintings, naked, bound, "sweating" blood and physically decaying:

Lullay, lullay litel child, wel mauth þu crize,
For þan þi bodi is bleyk & blak, sone after sal ben drige. (ll. 11-12)

In the lullaby, the ghostly paleness of Christ's naked corpse, the minute attention to the details of his bloody wounds resembles the descriptions of Christ's wounds found in the Candet nudatum pectus of St. Augustine which was translated earlier in the 14th century by William Herebert and had appeared in a vernacular poem by Grimestone's contemporary, Richard Rolle:

Whyte was his naked breste, & rede his bloody syde,
Wan was his faire face, his woundes depe & wyde;
þe iewyis wald not wande to pyme hym in þat tyde--
Als streme doese of þe strande, his blode gan downe glyde.⁴⁷

In another important Nativity lullaby from Grimestone's collection, Mary describes her shivering son in a form reminiscent of a Crucifixion dialogue from the same commonplace book which is based directly on Bernard of Clairvaux's Crucifixion meditation, Respice in faciem Christi.⁴⁸ In the vernacular

Passion poem, the audience is challenged to look on the body of Christ to see the marks of his suffering, recalling, too, the O vos omnes of Lamentations and the Good Friday liturgy in which Christ pleads with the passers-by to gaze upon his wounds. In the lullaby, itself, Mary gazes lovingly on the body of her baby and proceeds to enumerate in detail the poverty of his cradle and the increasing misery of the shivering child.

Ler to louen as i loue þe;
 On al my limes þu mith i-se
 Hou sore þei quaken for colde;
 For þe i suffre michil wo.
 Loue me, suete, an no-mo--
 To þe i take & holde.

Thesu, suete sone dere,
 In porful bed þu list nou here,
 & þat me greuet sore;
 For þi credel is als a bere;
 Ox & Asse ben þi fere--
 Wepen may I þer fore.

Thesu, suete, be nout wroth,
 I haue neiper clut ne cloth
 Þe inne for to folde;
 Þe ne haue but a clut of a lappe,
 Þerfore ley þi feet to my pappe,
 & kep þe fro þe colde....⁴⁹

In the many 15th century lullaby carols which follow the example of Grimestone's 14th century cradle songs, the association of Passion with Nativity becomes a commonplace theme. The 15th century lullaby carols can be considered a fairly important group of religious lyrics for the artistry and the ease with which they conveyed the dual themes of birth and death. To my mind, these carols recreate especially well the peculiar and delicate feeling of emotional ambiguity or "pathos" which Sarah Appleton Weber argues is the hallmark of the Middle English religious lyric.⁵⁰ I have found Weber's recent and thorough study of the liturgical foundation of the medieval religious lyric particularly useful in the narrow context of these

lullaby poems where the influence of the liturgy is stronger than in any other group of Nativity works. In the lullabies one can see, for example, how the liturgy's central event, Christ's death, always balances the more joyful event of the Nativity so that every lullaby lyric appears to offer a formal structure in which the duality of birth and death, Incarnation and Passion, sorrow and joy are affirmed simultaneously.

Even before the more sophisticated development of the lullaby carol of the 15th century, the opposition of Nativity and Passion are formal organizing principles in the 14th century cradle songs. In the Nativity lullaby "Als I lay," one of the pre-carol songs from Grimestone's collection, paradox and antithesis define the dogmatic content as well as the structure of the poem. The poem can be divided into two parts-- Mary's rather naive recitation of the events leading up to the birth and her joy, albeit short-sighted, in her infant son; and Christ's rehearsal of the painful, macabre events after his birth.⁵¹

As in the above example, the 14th century lullabies appear to me to treat the paradox of birth to death in a structurally schematic way. However, in the 15th century lullaby carols, the opposition I have observed between Nativity and Passion (one which Weber affirms as a general and static principle of form in all Annunciation and Nativity lyrics) is seamlessly interwoven into the verbal fabric of the poem and into the drama between the mother and son. These later lullaby carols dwell more fully on the psychological effects of Mary's and Christ's suffering and, consequently, on the variety and depth of their characters. In one particular 15th century carol, paradox defines Mary's own despairing nature: she continually changes her moods, from gaiety to sadness. When Jesus himself informs her of the reason for his weeping, her response shows human irresolution. She

vows to be forever sad because of the cruel fate her son must face, then inexplicably she begs the child to refrain from weeping and to put on a cheerful face.

... 'Moder,' he sayde, 'for mane I wepe so sore
& for hys loue I shall be tore

With scorgyng, wyth tretnyng,
with bobbyng, syth betyng
for sothe, moder, I saye;
And one A crosse full hy hanggyng,
And to my herte foll sore styckyng
A spere on good frydaye.'

Thys maydene Aunswerde wyth hevy chere,
'Shalt þu thus sovere, my swete sone dere?

Now y morne, now y muse,
I all gladness refuse;
I, euer fro thus day,
My dere sone, y þe pray,
thys payne þu put away,
and yf hyt possybyll be may.⁵²

This fickle behaviour may be shocking when attributed to the stylized, grieving Mary of the 14th century lullaby who attempts to take on bodily the physical discomfort of her son in Grimestone's "Ler to louen as i loue þe."⁵³ Yet it is the kind of behaviour that is fully appropriate to a human, emotionally complex portrait of Mary derived, perhaps, from the burgeoning medieval drama. Out of the influence of the Passion plays, especially, we see how antithesis and paradox were internalized into the character of Mary in the above poem to provide realistic motivation for her character in order to make her more credible.

Weber's notion of the polar relationships of the major events in Christ's life as a principle governing the form of the medieval religious lyric is useful in our investigation of the crucifixion elements which were integrated into the lullabies. Weber's argument works especially well when applied to the earlier lullabies which tended to preserve the

harsh tone and gruesome details of the Passion lyrics. Yet in the later lullaby carols contained in the large minstrel collections in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, new literary influence from dramatic or secular lyric poetry seems to be operating in ways that suggest the danger of taking too seriously Weber's thesis. It is perhaps better to regard Weber's notion of polarity as a flexible aesthetic principle, rather than a static, absolute one, a principle of balance and proportion rather than of opposition.

In these late lullaby carols, what is obvious is the growing refinement of the carol. Here we see a greater influx of dramatic or theatrical techniques, more lighthearted or melodramatic treatments of theme, a less ecclesiastical and more objective point of view. The teaching of proper church doctrine regarding the eucharistic interpretation of the Nativity theme is often undermined by the sheer vitality of the characters who often overpower the sober church morality. In many of these carols, for example, mournfulness is augmented for sheer emotional intensity and theatrical effect, even beyond what is usually necessary for the conveying of the penitential aspects of the Nativity.⁵⁴

Or, what is usually the case, the later lullaby carols turn away from the bleak moralism of Grimestone's early liturgical lullabies to more lighthearted treatments of doctrine. In one lullaby carol from the Bodleian manuscript, the poet depicts mother and child as real personages but in the idealized, festive sense of courtly, contemporary figures. Mary is referred to as a "lovely lady" and addressed by her son in the familiar erotic term "Brid" or Spouse; Christ is attended not by shepherds and angels but by "lordes, dukes and kings." More importantly, the problem whose solution Mary seeks does not involve the question of Christ's Passion at

all but rather the question of his demeaned royalty. No mention is made of martyrdom or mortality. Mary at the end asks a boon of Christ -- not the salvation of mankind -- but the request common to the more festive "wassail" songs that all men "be mery upon my day."

... "Now tell me, swete son, I thee pray,
 Thou art me leve and dere,
 How shud I kepe thee to thy pay
 And make thee glad of chere?
 For all thy will I wold fulfill,
 Thou weteste full well in fay;
 And for all this I will thee kiss,
 And sing, By by, lullay."

'My dere moder, whan time it be,
 Thou take me up on loft,
 And sette me upon thy knee,
 And handell me full soft;
 And in they arme thou hill me warme,
 And kepe night and day;
 If that I wepe and may not slepe.
 Thou sing, By by, lullay.'

'Now swete son, sin it is so,
 That all thing is at they will,
 I pray thee graunte me a bone,
 If it be both right and skill,
 That child or man that will or can
 Be mery upon my day,
 To blisse hem bring, and I shall sing
 Lullay, By by, lullay.'⁵⁵

As the religious lullaby develops from Grimestone's liturgically based cradle songs to the carols of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, it is interesting to witness a gradual intrusion of literary influences from secular courtly love lyrics.⁵⁶ The above lullaby carol illustrates especially well the proximity of secular to religious materials, especially in the carols of the major minstrel collections, most of which were composed by worldly clerics who moved easily between the worlds of minstrelsy and ecclesiastical piety. Yet even the more worldly of these lullaby carols must be seen in their larger framework of doctrinal verse:

poems like the above lullaby still assert the Franciscan devotion to Christ's humanity in portraying the tender, human embraces of Virgin and child and the maternal efforts to cheer the weeping infant. The air of festivity may be the more primitive note and the feature indigenous to the carol form; yet it is the doctrinal element that clearly prevails in the lullaby carol.

Although the genuine artistry of these lullaby carols as a whole is clearly obvious, there are no works that bespeak the elegance and fineness of diction and meter that we find in some of the Marian Nativity poems which we will treat next. Yet I believe this group of Nativity verse to be historically the most important because the touchingly naturalistic vision of the birth that is created here is the seminal view that subtly shapes the tradition of Nativity verse subsequent to the Middle Ages. The consistent chord that is struck in all Nativity poems from the Middle Ages to the 20th century has its source in these lullabies which depict the newborn Jesus with infinitely more pathos and with greater depth and human detail than did the Latin Middle Ages.

V

Aside from the Nativity lullabies, the medieval poems offering the most poetically interesting and imaginative examples of Nativity verse are the incarnational works dealing principally with the widespread medieval devotion to Mary in her role as Virgin mother and Heavenly Bride of Christ. Strictly speaking, these Marian poems could be considered thematically distinct from the main body of Nativity works we are discussing in this chapter. Yet I have discovered that medieval Marian verse may well be an important early source for the vernacular Nativity theme. In 13th century vernacular works dealing with Mary's Joys, a popular theme in Latin hymns, there is some limited treatment of Mary's Second Joy, the Nativity.⁵⁷ The presence of the Nativity theme in these early Marian poems would indicate that the date in which the theme enters vernacular poetry may well be set back a century earlier than the 14th century carol, "Honnd by honnd."

It seems to me, too, that the two strands of verse, Nativity poems and Mary poems, are never clearly demarcated in the Middle Ages but often exemplify a peculiar, symbiotic relationship. In the 15th century, the rapidly developing Nativity poems often influence the main body of Marian poems: for example, small lullabies are often imposed as flashbacks into the Marian Passion laments in order to advance the pathos of the scene and the suffering of Mary.

...Alas! y sawe my dere chylde blede:
 he may not speke to mudur his.
 I lullyd hym, y lapped him, y wolde him fede--
 so cruelly wes neuyr childe slayn y-wys...
 And y, þat knywe neuer of man-is kynde,
 y bare him in my body, clene myde as y was.⁵⁸

What this section of the chapter will focus on are the small number of 15th century poems which appear to straddle the Nativity and Annunciation or Incarnation themes thus producing unusually rich and subtle works in which neither Nativity or Marian theme predominates.⁵⁹ These works generally incorporate lullaby motifs or historical birth-narrations into courtly, romantic settings. Yet they differ from the general corpus of historical or lullaby carols in their poetic manner: they are not as occupied with inculcating unadorned Nativity doctrine or Biblical history as with professing a strong, sensual attachment to Mary herself as a romantic heroine and a pivotal figure in the poems. Interestingly, too, these poems enter the realm of secular love poetry in that they borrow heavily from the courtly romance tradition: many features from the chanson d'aventure and pastourelle, for example, like the poet's journey, the dream-vision, the overhearing of a maiden's complaint, the springtime setting, the elegant and effusive description of the maiden's physical charms, are common in these Marian Nativity carols.⁶⁰

The first clerical composers may have initiated the parodic method by which these courtly romance carols, and indeed most of the carols in general, operated. In their self-proclaimed role as iongolators dei, these Franciscan composers saw themselves in the long tradition of the continental antecedents of the religious carol, like the ballata or the Goliardic cantilenae of the Carmina Burana, whose composers, roving minstrels or students, parodied religious themes in secular song contexts to amuse their courtly audiences.⁶¹

Here in these Marian Nativity carols, especially, we see how erotic imagery and amorous fictional devices are directed specifically toward a didactic purpose: the praise of the maid-mother's fecundity and purity.

By the time these carols were composed, generally in the mid-15th century, the combination of erotic with devotional materials was a familiar characteristic of formal as well as of popular church literature. In addition to the commonplace practice among carol composers of setting religious lyrics to popular love-tunes, the Marian carols could look to the secular tradition of the courtly romance heroine as well as its religious counterpart in the 11th and 12th century monastic devotions to Mary by the followers of Adam of St. Victor;⁶² both traditions used the technique of allegory and sensuous imagery to enhance the idealization of the romance heroine and the Virgin. In addition, there was the example of sensuous but pious womanhood contained in the Bible, itself, in the erotic Song of Songs, a work often interpreted by the church as an allegorical encomium of Mary.

However, in addition to the orthodox, sensual language of religious praise, there is present in the courtly romance carols like the lyric "Verbum caro factum est" an extra secular ingredient -- an earthly pleasure in the event of Christmas pointing to the ancient, pre-Christian folk understanding of the Nativity as a time of natural renewal and Saxon revel.⁶³

One can see this uncritical, erotic, a-religious delight in the person of Mary and in the Christmas holiday in "Verbum caro factum est" through the fiction of the reverdie or spring song that the carol sets forth. Although the poem depicts essentially a lullaby scene, what is described is not the hoary winter of December nor the Bethlehem stable but a green bower in spring. This April setting provides the backdrop for a lighthearted pastoral idyll with kings, shepherds and poet attending the radiant Virgin maid. Mary is described as a heroine in the best sense of the courtly romance or chanson d'aventure tradition: she is lovely, cool, elusive and the seductive object of every man's adoration. In order to render her

feminine qualities in an idealized manner, her role as mother is subordinated and shown through subtle, symbolic ways in order not to detract from her qualities as "leman." The cradle scene is perfected and distanced by its recounting at third hand by the "ryalest" of the magi who sees in the lullaby scene only the splendor and none of the pathos or painful physicality of mother and child. Mary, too, is portrayed as a young and comely maiden, in keeping with her virgin purity. Christ, the infant, though supposedly present at the scene, is conveniently kept out of sight.

I Passud þoru a garden grene,
 I fond a herbere made full newe--
 A semelyour syght I haff nocht sene,
 O ylike treo sange a turtull trew--
 There-yn a mayden brygt off hew,
 And euer sche sange & neuer sche sest:
 Thies were þe notus þat sche can schew,
 Verbum caro factum est.

I askud þat mayden what sche mentt,
 Schee bad me byde & I schuld here;
 What sche sayd I toke gude tent,
 yn hyr songe had sche voice full clere:
 Sche said, 'a prynce withouten pere
 Ys borne & layd betwene to best;
 Therefore I synge as ze may here
 Verbum caro factum est.

And þorouht þat frythe as I can wend,
 A blestfull song zit hard I mo;
 And þat was of threo scheperdus hend,
 'Gloria in excelsis deo.'
 I wold nocht they had faren me fro,
 And eft-hyr þen full fast I prest;
 Then told þei me þat þei sange ssoo
 ffor verbum caro factum est.

They said þat songe was þis to sey:
 'To god a-bouun be joy & blysse!
 ffor pece yn erth also we pray,
 Tyll allmen þat yn goodnesse ys.
 Þe may þat is withouten mysse
 hasse borne a child be-twene to best;
 Sche is þe cause per-off Iwysse
 That verbum caro factum est.'

I fared me furthe yn þat frythe
 I mett threo commely kyngis with crone;
 I spod me furth to speke þem with,
 & on my knees I kneled done.
 Þe ryalest of home to me con rone
 And said, 'we farred wele at þe fest,
 ffro bethlehem now are we bone
 ffor verbum caro factum est.

'ffor we seo god be-commun yn mannus flesh,
 þat bote hasse broght off all oure bale,
 A-wey oure synnus forto wesche;
 A mey hym harburd yn hur hall,
 Sche soccourd hym sothly yn hur sale,
 & held þat hend yn hur a-rest;
 ffol trewly mey sche tell þat tale
 That verbum caro factum est.'

Vntyll þat prences wyll we pray,
 Als sche is bothe moder & mayd,
 Sche be oure help als sche wele may
 To serue hyme we be prest & payd,
 And þer-to make we oure behest,
 ffor I hard when sche sange & said
 'Verbum caro factum est.'⁶⁴

Yet the secular, erotic elements work within a subtle yet encompassing religious framework, for the medieval composer and his audience assumed that this work was not a romantic trifle but a serious religious poem teaching a particular church doctrine. There is a lack of obvious references to traditional descriptions of the Nativity as recorded in Luke and Matthew. However, the poet has carefully chosen his symbols in the poem so that even though they bear an erotic significance underscoring Mary's sensuality, they also relate overall to the dogma of Christ's Incarnation in the flesh. The "herbere" or enclosed garden that the poet finds so lovely, green and "new" is not simply the traditional bower of love in which a romance heroine's plaintive monologue is heard or a romantic rendezvous recounted. Rather it is the hortus conclusus of the Song of Songs, the enclosed "garden" or womb of Mary which encircles "in litel space" the material presence of Christ.⁶⁵ Even the bird who sings

in this pastoral setting is a traditional religious symbol evoking the doctrine of the Nativity: it is not the nightingale, the well-known melancholy bird of human passion, but the turtledove, the bird of sacrifice and peace whose voice in the Song of Songs proclaims the end of winter and a new season of glad songs, a kind of cosmic "nativity" associated with Christ's own miraculous birth.

This Marian carol offers the most typical iconographical view of the Nativity scene or of the intimate picture of the Virgin and Jesus. In spite of the widespread devotion to the Passion, a theme which encroached upon an important body of medieval Nativity lyrics, the lullabies, the predominant pictorial view of Virgin and child was a tender, idealized one from which much of the infant's suffering and the mother's concern was excised. From the dignified, noble Virgins and infants of the Romanesque sculptors to the graceful, childlike "Beautiful Madonnas" of the 15th century German and Flemish masters, the Nativity scene was given a charm and sweetness noticeably lacking in the harsh representations of the Pietà.⁶⁶

The best-known, most successful Marian poem dealing with the theme of the "Beautiful Madonna" is the lyric "I syng of a myden," a poem in which secular materials coalesce with Christian. It differs from the other Marian carols like "Verbum caro factum est" on similar Incarnation or Nativity themes in that it is more reverent and allusive than sensuous or lighthearted in its praise of Mary. Also, the poem is not a carol proper, for it lacks the proper stanza pattern and alternating stanza-burden form. Rather, it is a lyric in ballad meter which shares the general popular and dramatic features of the 15th century Nativity carol. In his depiction of the Incarnation, the poet invests the relationship of God (or Logos-principle as personified in Christ) and Mary with a metaphorically sexual

dimension. Christ, the Logos, comes to the bower and bed of Mary as a knight to his lady. And, as suggested in the spermatic image of the April dew that "fallyt on the spray," she is mysteriously made "godes moder."

I Syng of a myden þat is makeles,
kyng of alle kynges to here sone che ches.

he cam also styлле þer his moder was
as dew in aprylle, þat fallyt on þe gras.

he cam also styлле to his moderes bowr
as dew in aprille, þat fallyt on the flour.

he cam also styлле þer his moder lay
as dew in aprille, þat fallyt on the spray.

moder & mayden was neuer non but che⁷⁷
wel may swych a lady godes moder be.⁶⁷

The poem has been understandably a great favorite among scholars of the medieval religious lyric who have long recognized the rare beauty that has set the work apart from the bulk of religious lyrics. Any serious study of the poem is vastly indebted to the work a generation ago of George Kane, Leo Spitzer and John Speirs who have explored the verbal texture of the work in exacting detail and have shown the "Mayden" to be a poem of enormous technical complexity and craftsmanship.⁶⁸ Yet to my mind, the result of these able studies has been to elevate the work above the Christian tradition out of which it springs. Although Spitzer treats at length the incarnational symbol of the dew and its relationship to the Biblical manna, he is almost apologetic that the poem has its source in a "venerable Scriptural concept." Similarly, Kane professes to treat the "Mayden" in terms of its religious background, yet praises the poem primarily for its pictorial and allusive diction, qualities which would make the poem more accessible for modern readers. By deeming "I Syng of a Myden" the "ideal religious lyric" for its suggestive language, he seems to reject, by comparison, the explicit doctrinal content in this poem and in the majority

of other medieval religious poems.

I have found more useful in my examination of the poem the recent critical attempts by Stephen Manning, D. G. Halliburton and Thomas Jemielity to fix the work firmly in its dogmatic foundation and to examine the substantive theological core of meaning that lies at the center of the poem.⁶⁹ These scholars suggest that for all its indirection, the poem develops an essentially orthodox theme regarding the dual aspects of purity and fertility in the Virgin-mother. Yet the extent to which the work has offered "traditional" doctrine in its sensual depiction of the Incarnation in Mary's womb has been a point of contention among some recent critics and has made the poem a focus of scholarly debate. On the one hand, D. G. Halliburton has argued against an erotic interpretation of the poem and has asserted the "traditional" non-sensual nature of the work in presenting not the divine intercourse of Mary and God at the Incarnation but the orthodox portrait of Mary as a sexual innocent. On the other hand, Stephen Manning and T. Jemielity have made a far more convincing case for a well-developed allegorical tradition in secular romance lore and in the liturgy and prophetic literature of the Bible in which Mary's fecundity and sexual union with the deity underscored her pivotal role in the redemption and enhanced the notion of the Incarnation as an inexplicable religious mystery.

I feel, however, to limit the lyric, as Halliburton does, to one "traditional" interpretation of unspotted humility and purity regarding the Virgin would de-emphasize the obvious complexity and allusiveness in the poem and would vastly oversimplify the uneven and similarly complex matrix of associations surrounding the Virgin herself. As Manning and Jemielity have argued so well, the sexual implications of Christ's coming to Mary in her bower and bed are the poem's donnée. And their congress

is a traditional, fully orthodox union drawing from the well-known lore of the courtly romances and from other sources in the Bible and liturgy concerning the Advent or Incarnation. The poem, therefore, partakes of both secular and Christian erotic traditions, yet re-organizes both features into an intricate unity evoking the larger, doctrinal message of Mary's virgin-maternity.

I would further suggest that the erotic tradition in the Marian carols is even more well-developed in this Nativity lyric than either Manning, Jemielity or originally Spitzer have suggested. There are still other unmentioned sources for erotic portraits of the Virgin Mary in church literature that possibly relate to this poem. Aside from Spitzer's analysis of the dew as fertility image in the Advent liturgy or as manna in the Pentateuch, there is the obvious example of the epithalamic Song of Songs which was generally interpreted in the Middle Ages as an allegory involving Mary, as Virgin Bride of Christ. Many beautiful crucifixion poems and Assumption lyrics of this century, among them "Quia Amore Languet" or "Surge mea Sponsa" directly imitate the phrasing and fictional wedding situation of the Song of Songs.⁷⁰ It would therefore not be surprising to discover in a Marian poem on the Incarnation the incorporation of similar amorous motifs from the Song of Songs such as the lover-Christ or Bride searching and discovering the beloved's bower, narrative features which had already been incorporated into the Passion poems dealing with the grieving Mary.

One should regard this poem, then, no matter how one interprets the word "makeles" as either searching for a mate or unspotted in virtue, as a supremely traditional piece offering orthodox characterizations of Mary. I have discovered that one need only look at the hymns in the Latin liturgy, most specifically the Ambrosian Christmas hymn, "Intende qui regis Israel,"

for the notion that Mary indeed was duly impregnated by the Word of God in the Hellenistic form of Logos spermatikos or as creative, Second Cause. Yet in the Latin church tradition, this intercourse at the Incarnation was not viewed as a natural phenomenon, but as a magical, divine occurrence that permitted Mary's virginity to remain intact even throughout childbirth.⁷¹ In Ambrose's Christmas hymn, the infusion of Logos into Mary's womb, though metaphorically described as a sexual act, is carefully distinguished from the natural phenomenon of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman.

...Veni, redemptor gentium,
ostende partum virginis;
miretur omne saeculum,
talis decet partus Deum.

Non ex virili semine
sed mystico spiramine
verbum Dei factum est caro,
fructusque bentrīs floriūt...⁷²

"I Syng of a Myden," then, is a remarkable and supremely skillful unity of erotic secular with Christian materials conveying the notion that the Incarnation is an allegorically sexual act and the portrait of Mary as a seductive but innocent love-object. The depiction of the Incarnation in this manner does not demean the validity and seriousness of the poem's message, nor does it undermine the character of Mary. Rather, it occurs to me that her role as temple of God is always affirmed by virtue of the fact that she appears to be more than human. She is placed in the glorified position of "choosing" her divine mate, of being so virtuous as to initiate her state of blessedness. She exhibits no mortal traits of profanity or amorous laxity. Both her lover-Son and she are silent, restrained, "stille," reflecting the silence of the mystical Word's entry into the human sphere and the humility and noble reverence of Mary at the Annunciation as recorded in Luke. And, like the descent of Peace in John Milton's

"On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," the humbling of the divine into the mortal sphere is actually accomplished by another object, the April dew which descends upon the "spray," in order not to detract from the divinity of both Christ and Mary.

Manning's assertion that "I syng of a mayden" is the "supreme achievement of the medieval English lyric" is not without foundation. By virtue of the poet's artistry, the poem develops qualities of allusiveness, compression and sharpness of imagery so that it appears deceptively contemporary and, therefore, as Kane has pointed out, more understandable stylistically to modern readers. Yet the poem should not be divorced from its didactic, homiletic medieval matrix. One should evaluate the work in terms of the remarkable manner in which it "exfoliates" or gains in complexity and power from its doctrinal base.

The fact that erotic and religious materials are so seamlessly interwoven, that in spite of the critical controversy that surrounds the poem at present it still remains an aesthetically pleasing work, intellectually accessible even without a reader's full knowledge of the religious dogma supporting it, is an indication of the gifts of this medieval poet. Here, then, is a solitary example of a medieval poem treating the theme of the Incarnation and Nativity which accomplishes what Rosemary Woolf describes as the typical achievement of the more refined, elaborate poems on the Passion:⁷³ it derives meaning from its ecclesiastical sources, yet surpasses these doctrinal limitations by realizing the full poetic potential of its religious theme..

The medieval poems on the Nativity, when seen in terms of the development of devotional poetry as a whole, cannot be considered the finest

examples of religious poetry in their time. They are quickly superceded in artistry by the more learned, literary works on the Nativity in the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet they are a major current of religious verse in the vernacular, in spite of their relatively modest and uneven poetic achievements. Within the doctrinal confines in which these poems operate, the medieval Nativity poems offer a multiplicity of seminal treatments of the birth theme. In attempting to communicate the Franciscan devotion to the humanity of Christ to the people, they offer keen naturalistic and philosophical portraits of the participants in the Nativity story that other, later poets would continue to assimilate or interpret in their works. They display a wide and interesting range of attitudes to the event of Christ's entry into human time -- morbidity, tenderness, frivolousness, irreligion and reverence. Significantly, too, the theme is occasionally joined to valuable and important poetic works, as in the case of the lyric "I syng of a myden," a poem which presents a unique poetic fiction and an individual lyric response, disengaging the theme from the commonplace and formal expositions of Nativity dogma.

Notes to Chapter One -- The Middle Ages

¹The earliest recorded Nativity lyric is "Honnd by honnd" (which is also the first example of the manuscript carol). See Religious Lyrics of the 14th Century, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1970), 1st publ. 1924, no. 88.

²Rosemary Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1968), Appendix B.

³I am referring to Peter Dronke's use of the term "clerc" to mean anyone who had received a general clerical education, whether he be priest or layman. See The Medieval Lyric (New York, 1969), p. 27. See also Raymond Oliver's useful description of secular or priestly preachers and the upper and middle class laymen who composed the lyrics: Poems Without Names (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 12-13.

The general didactic function of the Nativity lyrics is upheld by evidence relating the religious lyrics to frequent use in preaching. See G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Oxford, 1966), 1st publ. 1933, pp. 17-19, for the tracing of the lyrics to Christ to homiletic rather than mystical fervor. See also Oliver's view that Christmas carols were sung in church processions by priest and congregation: Poems Without Names, p. 12.

Brown further notes that "Honnd by honnd" occurs in a series of Franciscan sermon outlines and that Grimestone's collection of Nativity lyrics is scattered throughout a well-organized set of sermon notes: Religious Lyrics of the 14th Century, nos. 55-76; pp. 264, 272.

⁴All of these important, recent studies show how widely the various scholarly approaches to the lyrics differ. Stephen Manning, Wisdom and Number (Lincoln, Neb., 1962) treats the lyrics in terms of their background in the medieval song tradition; Peter Dronke explores the European contexts of the lyrics, especially with regard to their relationship to the continental music tradition and the "courtly love experience;" see Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love Lyric, vol. I (Oxford, 1965) and The Medieval Lyric (New York, 1969); Rosemary Woolf discusses the meditative background of the religious poems in The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1968); Sarah A. Weber asserts the liturgical basis for the religious poems in Theology and Poetry in the Middle English Lyric (Columbus, Ohio, 1969); Raymond Oliver treats the public, social nature of the lyrics and their function in the popular church festivals of the period in Poems Without Names (Berkeley, 1970).

⁵E. K. Chambers, "Some Aspects of Medieval Lyric" printed in Early English Lyrics, ed. F. Sidgwick and E. K. Chambers (London, 1966), 1st publ. 1907, p. 290.

Chambers' contention has been re-affirmed in W. T. H. Jackson's more recent overview of the medieval lyric. He praises the medieval lyric for a "pleasing naivete and simple charm" yet discovers a "monotony of theme and lack of technical skill." The Literature of the Middle Ages (New York, 1960), p. 275.

⁶See George Kane's useful description of the "aesthetic problem" of the medieval lyrics, part of which, it seems to me, is due to critical standards set by modern poetic criteria: Middle English Literature, part II (London, 1951), pp. 104-181.

⁷For the best summaries of the secular and religious origins of the English carol, see R. Greene's introduction to his edition of The Early English Carols (Oxford, 1935); R. H. Robbins' introduction to Early English Christmas Carols (New York, 1961) and the first chapter of Douglas Brice, The Folk-Carol of England (London, 1951).

⁸For my definition of the term "carol" in terms of its poetic form, I am indebted to R. L. Greene's use of the term and his treatment of its prosodic characteristics and its primary themes in the introduction to The Early English Carols. The term was commonly distinguished by its stanza-burden form in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, and the misconceptions concerning the carol form are probably of modern origin. Edith Rickert notes that as late as the 17th century, the "primitive" use of the term as a dance-song with refrain was prevalent as in the work "Clod's Carol, or a Proper New Jig." See Ancient English Christmas Carols (New York, 1966), p. xiv.

⁹The best factual summary of the theological history of the Incarnation and Nativity and the notion of Christ as Logos in the early church thought is contained in the discussions on Irenaeus, Athanasius, Origen and Tertullian in "L'Enfance de Jesus," Dictionnaire de Spiritualite (Paris, 1960), IV, 651 ff.

¹⁰Religious Lyrics of the 15th Century, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1970), 1st publ. 1939, nos. 118-121.

¹¹For a good discussion of the various symbols of the Virgin from the Victorine sequences of the 12th century (fons hortatum, skipping roe, temple, Ark of Noah, throne of Solomon, second Eve), see F. J. E. Raby, A History of Christian-Latin Poetry (Oxford, 1966), pp. 364-368.

¹²R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 121.

¹³In Greene's brief but useful study of the Latin liturgical sources of the carols, he notes the frequency with which the proses and sequences from the Christmas liturgy (in metrical and stanzaic form) became the matter for Christmas carols. Early English Carols, pp. lxix ff. also contains a detailed chart noting the sources and carols in which borrowing occurs.

¹⁴R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 77B.

¹⁵Rosemary Woolf makes the point that Nativity poems in the vernacular were a fairly late occurrence: the novelty of the theme and its proximity to the Passion is shown in the early Nativity lyrics of Grimestone which were copied under the heading of the Passion. See The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, p. 143.

¹⁶Grimestone's "In bedlem is a child i-born" begins like a Nativity hymn but reserves only 2 stanzas for the Nativity and quickly moves to an extended rehearsal of the Epiphany and Herod's betrayal. R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 57.

See also A. Horton's discussion of the theme of the Magi's worship of the babe as a late medieval phenomenon, in The Child Jesus (New York, 1975), pp. 78, 90-91.

¹⁷R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 87.

¹⁸See A. Horton for a review of folk legends like the miracle of the wheatfield which had entered the Epiphany tradition in art and poetry: The Child Jesus, pp. 110 ff.

¹⁹Compare the above poem with the following scene from The Massacre of the Innocents in the Chester Cycle on the death of Herod.

Herod: Alas! what the devil is this to moan?
 Alas my days be now done;
 I know I must die soon.
 Bootless it is to make moan,
 Though damned I must be.
 My legs rot and my arms,
 And now I see of fiends swarms--
 I have done so many harms--
 From Hell coming after me,
 For I have done so much woe,
 And never good. Since I must go.
 Therefore I see coming my foe
 To fetch me to hell...

Medieval and Tudor Drama, ed. John Gassner (New York, 1963), pp. 146-147.

²⁰E. K. Chambers, "Some Aspects of Medieval Lyric," p. 275.

²¹William Phillips, Carols: Their Origin, Music and Connection With Mystery Plays (Westport, Conn., 1971), ch. 9.

²²Many details of the hymn-like carols link them to the shepherds and angels of Bethlehem, especially in the invocations to "rise" and rejoice in the news of the birth. See especially R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, nos. 70, 80; Medieval English Lyrics, ed. R. T. Davies (London, 1963), no. 100; and Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, nos. LXXII, LIX.

²³R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 130; compare with Fr. Herebert's version in R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 12.

²⁴R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 88.

²⁵My conclusion concerning the public nature of this group of works

seems to coincide with that of Raymond Oliver in Poems Without Names, cited above. Raymond's work came to my attention, unfortunately, after the bulk of my work had been completed.

²⁶Erik Routley, The English Carol (Oxford, 1959), ch. 3.

²⁷See Brice, The Folk Carol of England, p. 90 ff., for a discussion of the carols as intermezzi.

²⁸This pastoral Nativity carol and its 16th century version (Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, no. LXVI) has interesting similarities in setting and phrasing with an amorous dialogue between poet and milkmaid (no. XXVIII).

²⁹Medieval and Tudor Drama, ed. Gassner, pp. 133-134.

³⁰Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, no. LXVII.

³¹See Brice's discussion of the Nativity ballad, The Folk Carol of England, ch. 2.

³²R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 117.

³³Frances Fox, Legends of the Christ Child (New York, 1947), pp. 52 ff; A. Horton, The Child Jesus, pp. 36 ff.

³⁴English and Scottish Popular Ballads (from the collection of F. J. Child), ed. Helen C. Sargent and G. L. Kittredge (Boston, 1932), no. 54A.

³⁵Edwin King's version, Journal of the English Folk-Song, no. 14, vol. IV (June, 1910).

³⁶A. Horton, The Child Jesus, pp. 153-163.

³⁷R. Woolf notes that vernacular Nativity lullabies are written a century after the theme had become popular in Latin meditations. The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, p. 144.

³⁸The best treatment of the Nativity lullaby's connection with Passion poems and prose meditations is R. Woolf's Appendix B in the work cited above.

³⁹St. Francis' biographers and disciples attempted to make direct parallels between the life of their saint and the life of Christ. See The Little Flowers of St. Francis and Other Franciscan Writings, tr. S. Hughes (New York, 1964), pp. 47-148.

⁴⁰English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1970), 1st publ. 1932, no. 31.

⁴¹R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 28.

⁴²R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, pp. 255, 260.

⁴³R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 65.

⁴⁴Philippe Ariès, L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale Sous L'Ancien Regime (Paris, 1960), pp. 14-17; 134 ff. Ariès asserts that the Middle Ages had no consciousness of infancy apart from adulthood.

⁴⁵I am a child and born full bare,
And bare out of this world scall fare;
Yet am I but wermes ware,
Thow I clothed go never so gay.

Thow I be of meche prise,
Fair of face, and holden wise,
Mine fleich schall faden as flour-dy-lys,
When I am ded and leid in clay.

When I am ded and leid in stone,
I scall roten fleich and bone,
Fro mine frendes I scall gone,
Christ help mine soulewhen I ne may...

Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, no. CIII.

⁴⁶R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 65.

⁴⁷R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 83.

⁴⁸R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 67.

⁴⁹R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 75.

⁵⁰See Sarah A. Weber's definition of terms in the preface to Theology and Poetry in the Middle English Lyric.

⁵¹R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 58.

⁵²R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 5.

⁵³R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 75, 11. 16-18.

⁵⁴Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, no. LXIII.

⁵⁵Ibid., no. LXIV.

⁵⁶Peter Dronke asserts the continuing reciprocity of medieval secular and religious lyrics, since both were "two strands of a single tradition" of popular song. See The Medieval Lyric, p. 27. Rosemary Woolf argues, more persuasively to me, that the religious lyric in England develops "untrammled" until the 15th century when secular love lyrics re-emerge in the vernacular and influence religious verse. See The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, p. 2.

⁵⁷E. L. of the 13th C., ed. Brown, nos. 18, 22, 41.

⁵⁸R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 6.

⁵⁹There was much tendency in the medieval Catholic church to blend Annunciation and Advent themes with Christmas ones. See F. J. E. Raby, A History of Christian-Latin Poetry, p. 226.

⁶⁰Helen Sandison, "The Chanson d'Aventure in Middle English," Bryn Mawr College Monographs, Mon. Ser. Vol. XII (1913), 103 ff.

⁶¹See R. L. of the 13th C., ed. Brown, p. xi for a discussion of the Red Book of Ossory, the collection of religious parodies of popular sec⁶²Raby⁶²erse; see also Raby, A History of Christian-Latin Poetry, p. 294 for Carmina Burana.

⁶²Raby, A History of Christian-Latin Poetry, pp. 364-368.

⁶³W. Schmauch, Christmas Literature through the Ages (Chicago, 1938), ch. 1. for treatment of non-Christian backgrounds in the celebration of Christmas.

⁶⁴R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 78.

⁶⁵For the background in medieval art on the theme of the Virgin as hortus conclusus, see Hans Hofstatter, The Art of the Late Middle Ages (New York, 1968), pp. 163-168; 195. See also Stanley Stewart, The Enclosed Garden: the Tradition and the Image in 17th Century Poetry (Madison, Wis; 1966), pp. 49-59 for the image in medieval art and literature until the 17th century.

⁶⁶Hofstatter, The Art of the Late Middle Ages, pp. 160 ff; 188.

⁶⁷R. L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 81.

⁶⁸Leo Spitzer, "L'Explication de Texte Applied to Three Great Middle English Poems," Archivum Linguisticum, 3 (1951), 152-163; George Kane, Middle English Literature, pp. 161-165; John Speirs, Medieval English Poetry (London, 1957), pp. 67-69.

⁶⁹Stephen Manning, "On 'I Syng of a Maiden'", PMLA, 75 (1960), 8012; D. G. Halliburton, "The Myden Makeles," Papers on Language and Literature, 4 (1968), 115-120; Thomas Jemielity, "'I Sing of a Maiden': God's Courting of Mary," Concerning Poetry, 2 (1969), 53-71.

⁷⁰R. L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 132; R. L. of the 15th C., no. 37.

⁷¹Peter Dronke, The Medieval Lyric, p. 144.

⁷²The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse, ed. F. J. E. Raby (Oxford, 1961), p. 13.

⁷³R. Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, p. 70.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sixteenth Century

The most poetically and historically significant stage in the development of the Nativity poem throughout English literary history is the Renaissance. From the 16th to the mid-17th centuries, the theme of Christ's Nativity substantially leaves its Scriptural and generally ecclesiastical base and begins to assume the proportions of a major literary theme associated with expressive, original works in English devotional poetry. Most of these Renaissance works break with the medieval tradition of impersonal narration of Scriptural history or prosaic rehearsal of dogma for a more allusive, learned and rhetorically complex poetic. The poet writing on the Nativity theme during this era exercises to a greater extent than the medieval cleric-composer his own creative literary impulses while still maintaining the theological verity of the Nativity and the integrity of his own faith.

Understandably, because of the Renaissance poet's more personal interpretation of dogma, the examples of Nativity poems in the Renaissance are very diverse and the poetic achievement of these works very uneven, ranging from the expressive liturgical hymns of Dunbar to the pedantic Christian pastorals of Edmund Bolton and the spare monologues of Herbert or Vaughan. Before its remarkable culmination from 1609 to 1650 in important literary milestones in devotional poetry by Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Milton and Vaughan, the theme undergoes a long preliminary period comprising the whole of the 16th century during which important attempts are made to convert Nativity doctrine into imaginative literature. In an interesting group of unrelated "transitional" Nativity works by William

Dunbar, Desiderius Erasmus, William Alabaster and Robert Southwell, we see the gradual expiration of doctrinal medieval verse and the intrusion of new contemporary literary influences from secular lyrics and European heroic poetry. We see especially in these poems the encroachment of myths and symbols from classical mythology and philosophy, metaphors from everyday life, and erotic imagery from Counter-Reformation verse giving an imaginative, literary dimension to the Nativity theme and adding a rich allusiveness to the texture of the devotional poet's language.

Generally, however, these 16th century Nativity poems are inferior in technique and vision to the 17th century works by Donne, Herbert, Crashaw and especially John Milton. Rather, the poems of this period should be considered part of an era of experimentation and ideological ferment leading up to the great literary milestone of Milton's "Nativity Ode." In particular, what gradually develops in these poems is the redemptive theology of the Reformers Luther and Calvin, both of whom affirmed the notion of a newborn Christ as abstraction rather than real person, as Second Adam rather than infant martyr, an idea revived from the Greek and Latin Fathers.¹ This redemptive aspect of the Nativity is presented most skillfully in the 16th century by those Latin European devotional poems used as models by most of the 17th century poets writing on the Nativity in the Renaissance such as the Rime Sacra by Tasso, Parthenice Mariana of Mantuan, De Partu Virginis of Sannazarro and the Christiad by Vida which were themselves influenced by the 8th century 8. Kalendar Ianuarias and Epiphany hymn of the Latin poet Prudentius.

However, unlike continental devotional poetry which borrowed redemptive treatments of the birth directly through literary sources treating similar notions in classical epics, myths and Latin poetry,² the integration

of the victor^{is} Christ of the Resurrection into English poetry of the 16th century was a complex, slow process tied primarily to the development of the Anglican and Puritan Churches in England.³ Most of the 16th century English poets never wholly abandon medieval Catholic symbolism: rather, they use literary references to antique myths and symbols and convey Reformation themes concerning a redemptive Christ while yet affirming traditional penitential formulations of the birth from the Roman liturgy or Synoptic Gospels.

William Dunbar's Rorate coeli de super, for example, is the most important Nativity poem of the early years of the century, for it contains the earliest suggestions of the Nativity as mystery and is an expressive, imaginative work. Yet it is undeniably a derivative medieval liturgical hymn. The Nativity poem of Desiderius Erasmus, though a Latin rather than a vernacular work, is the first poem in England to employ classical references in order to glorify the redemptive aspect of Christ and to place the theme into a classical literary tradition apart from the Roman Catholic idea of infant martyrdom. The Gospel poems treating the Nativity and childhood of Christ by Robert Southwell gives the Catholic interpretation of the theme a new ecstatic, Jesuit emphasis using martial imagery and looks directly ahead to the infant warrior of Milton's "Nativity Ode." And finally, William Alabaster's incarnational sonnets are the best examples of 16th century Nativity verse in the Elizabethan lyric manner, yet they frequently employ the images and impersonal style of liturgical poetry. Alabaster's poems derive from an important work containing Nativity echoes, Spenser's "An Hymne of Heavenly Love," a truly devotional work which is atypical of Spenser's other, Neoplatonic "hymnes."

I

William Dunbar

The first Nativity poem exhibiting important "Renaissance" features is the Nativity hymn of William Dunbar (1460-1520), Rorate coeli de super. This poem uses traditional, liturgical symbols to celebrate a redemptive rather than penitential interpretation of the Nativity, and displays an expressive, personal engagement with church doctrine that sets it apart from the more stylized, restrained lyrics of the Middle Ages. Yet in spite of his fresh, original approach to the Nativity theme, Dunbar's hymn cannot truly be said to have exerted a direct influence on later literary treatments of the theme in the next century. These 17th century Nativity poems, though employing the same themes of animism and natural renewal as the hymn of Dunbar, lack the lyrical simplicity and the undifferentiated persona of Rorate coeli de super, technical features which bespeak Dunbar's Latin liturgical models. Dunbar's Nativity hymn is best described as an unusual, late medieval anachronism which probably remained unknown to later Renaissance poets writing on the Nativity. Its peculiar "Renaissance" position regarding a redemptive infant Christ derives out of Catholic liturgical sources and is a product of Dunbar's own private emphasis on traditional medieval Nativity motifs rather than a radical new poetic interpretation of the birth. Yet although the hymn still is confined within the limits of doctrinal verse, the obvious personal engagement of the poet with dogma, the felicitous expansion of traditional symbols from nature and the dexterity with which the stanzas are thematically arranged into a paradigm of the hierarchical universe all suggest the artistry of Dunbar the poet in transmitting doctrine with eloquence and individual feeling.

The hymn, then, offers a hesitant though intriguing literary expansion of the traditional medieval Advent hymn into a more general allegorical paean to nature's rejuvenation at the Nativity of Christ. There are many features derived from the Latin hymn and Biblical tradition which show the hymn's ecclesiastical context: the poem's opening line directly alludes to Fortunatus' Advent hymn of the same name and Isaiah's Messianic oracle in 45:8; the refrain Pro nobis puer natus est is a direct quote from the Vulgate version of Isaiah 9:6 and is a popular refrain in macaronic Nativity carols. In ecstatic tone, it also resembles the Latin Nativity hymns of Ambrose or Philip the Chancellor or the hymn-like Biblical carols of the 15th century.⁴

Yet the poem stops short of offering pure medieval Nativity doctrine. Dunbar is not so intent in extracting a clear dogmatic or ethical principle regarding the Nativity as with expressing a deep emotional and intellectual commitment to his theme. This commitment is conveyed in the commendatory style and individual, inspired point of view of the Renaissance or Sidneyan "lyric" poet.⁵ Dunbar seems to ignore the more typical doctrinal interpretations of the Nativity theme from medieval poetry, for nowhere in his hymn are there traces of the Bethlehem narrative or of the penitential, naturalistic rendering of the cradle scene. Instead, the theme has become less specific and more symbolic and the subject not for impersonal church verse but for eloquent, inspirational "lyric" poetry sung by the "well-accorded voice" of the Sidneyan lyric poet. Christ is seen in the poem in his glorified aspect at the Resurrection and is not endowed with any specific shape but, rather, exists as a moral force among natural creatures.

Rorate celi desuper
 Hevins distill your balmy shouris,
 For now is rissen the bricht day ster
 Fro the ros Mary, flour of flouris;
 The cleir sone quhome no clud devouris,
 Surmounting Phebus in the est,
 Is commin of his hevinly touris
Et nobis Puer natus est.

Archangellis, angellis, and dompnationis,
 Tronis, potestatis, and marteiris seir,
 And all ye hevinly operationis,
 Ster, planeit, firmament and speir,
 Fyr, erd, air, and watter cleir,
 To hym gife loving, most and lest,
 That come in to se meik maneir
Et nobis Puer natus est. (ll. 1-16)⁶

Dunbar's "Rorate" is thus much more than what his biographer Tom Scott deems "a traditional piece celebrating the festival of Christmas,"⁷ for it far surpasses its Latin liturgical hymn models in emotional intensity and allusiveness. Out of the relatively small number of Latin Nativity hymns, it seems to me that the most widely-known by Ambrose, Sedulius and Praetorius are restrained, direct, narrative and didactic,⁸ whereas Dunbar's hymn is strong in feeling, highly rhetorical and imagistic, and composed of descriptive catalogues of objects in nature rather than chronological incidents in a historical setting. Dunbar's hymn transcends in stylistic virtuosity even its most immediate poetic models, a group of 15th century carols by James Ryman loosely based on the Te Deum and which Rosemary Woolf has identified with Dunbar's poem.⁹

Although Woolf has made a convincing case for Dunbar's appropriation of the organization of these Ryman carols into stanzas depicting an ecclesiastical "chain of being" into his own hymn's catalogues of hierarchical communities of the faithful in the natural and supernatural world,¹⁰ it is clear to me that the influence of these carols is limited and superficial. Neither the Latin hymns, whose lines are integrated into Dunbar's

hymn, nor the Ryman carols, whose structure is imitated, appear to impinge directly on the lyric technique or the theological position advanced by Dunbar in the poem. The Ryman carols, for example, are spare, narrative works primarily concerned with the Trinity and a more intellectual elaboration of the doctrine of the Incarnation as a "humiliation" of Christ's divinity into fleshly form and the sinfulness of man before Christ's coming. Also, Christ is not the only deity addressed in the carols: they are mainly instructional pieces focusing on the concept of the Trinity and on God the Father, above all.

By contrast with the Ryman carols, Dunbar sustains a "lyric" or rhapsodic tone throughout his hymn and professes a profound emotional attachment for the infant Messiah as perceived indirectly and metaphorically through the beauty and order of nature. Absent are Roman Catholic penitential doctrines evoking man's sense of sin or Christ's martyred presence in the womb or cradle. Instead, Dunbar presents vivid images of light, vegetation and music evoking a generalized concept of natural rebirth and articulating the abstract, redemptive view of Christ as Logos or Second Cause, a view widely held by Greek and Latin church Fathers beginning with Irenaeus and which antedated the Franciscan devotion to the human Jesus by many centuries.¹¹

What especially sets Dunbar's hymn apart from its earlier medieval hymn and carol predecessors is not only its fervent, personal tone but the obvious care Dunbar takes in purely "literary" matters, that is, his careful attention to the beauty and refinement of poetic diction. Whereas the declamatory Ryman carols and Latin hymns are generally non-imagistic, Dunbar's hymn features a great wealth of symbols and ornate language to convey his main idea of an animated, resurgent natural universe at the Nativity. Some rhetorical similarities may exist between the poem and the

aureate lyrics to the Virgin in heaven written during the 15th century. However, Dunbar's hymn offers not merely elevated diction but a self-contained allegorical universe suggesting the harmony that Christ's birth ushers in rather than depicting the actual Bethlehem setting of the Gospels.

Synnaris, be glaid and pennance do
 And thank your maker hairtfully,
 For he that ye mycht nocht cum to
 To yow is cummin full humly;
 Your saulis with his blud to by
 And lous yow of the feindis arrest,
 And only of his awin mercy
Pro nobis Puer natus est.

All clergy do to him inclyne
 And bow unto that barne benyng,
 And do your observance devyne
 To him that is of kingis king;
 Ensence his altar, reid and sing
 In haly kirk, with degest,
 Him honouring attour all thing
Qui nobis Puer natus est.

Celestiall fowlis in the are,
 Sing with your nottis upoun hicht,
 In firthis and in forrestis fair
 Be myrthfull now, at all your mycht;
 For passit is your dully nycht,
 Aurora hed the cluddis perst,
 The son is rissin with glaidsum lycht,
Et nobis Puer natus est.

Now spring up, flouris, fra the rute,
 Revert yow uptwart naturaly,
 In honour of the blissit frute
 That rais up fro the rose Mary;
 Lay out your levis lustely,
 Fro deid tak lyfe now at the lest
 In wirschip of that Prince wirthy
Qui nobis Puer natus est.

Syng hevin imperiall most of hicht,
 Regions of air mak armony;
 All fische in flud and foull of flicht
 Be myrthfull and mak melody;
 All Gloria in excelsis cry,
 Hevin, erd, se, man, bird, and best:
 He that is crownit abone the sky
Pro nobis Puer natus est. (ll. 9-40)

Probably the closest model for Dunbar's allegorical treatment of the Nativity is the Latin Christmas hymn of the 8th century Roman poet Prudentius, whose poems were read with revived interest in the 16th century.¹² Prudentius' influence on the continental religious eclogue and epic writers and on Milton has been widely acknowledged by most Miltonists ever since Albert Cook's important and close comparison of the "Nativity Ode" with the 8. Kalendar Ianuarias of Prudentius.¹³ It might not be unlikely to assume that Prudentius, too, exerted an earlier and more widespread influence on English Nativity poems with the Rorate coeli de super of Dunbar. If such is the case, Dunbar's poem would undeniably lie in the mainstream of English devotional literature and would clearly be seen as a strong, though undiscovered and unacknowledged bridge to other, later Renaissance poems which apply Prudentius' natural symbols to the dogma of the Nativity. Specifically, it occurs to me that Dunbar's hymn may well be a forgotten predecessor of Spenser's "Hymne of Heavenly Love." Dunbar's hymn seems to me to possess thematic and structural affinities with Spenser's third "Hymne." And Spenser's "Hymne", in turn, has been acknowledged by scholars to have had an important bearing on the music and light imagery of Milton's "Nativity Ode."¹⁴

In my study, Dunbar occupies a crucial position as the first English poet of the Renaissance to link the Nativity with the theme of a re-animated natural universe.¹⁵ Certainly, Dunbar's is the first poem in English poetry to describe, as Spenser and Milton do, an allegorical resurgence of spring at the Nativity and to employ the symbol of heavenly light as the controlling metaphor of the poem. From the first stanza of Dunbar's hymn, the divine infant is identified with an extra-terrestrial and marvelous phenomenon, the "bricht day star" which has displaced the light of "phebus in the est."

What is being described is not simply an idealized morning star, nor the historic Nativity star of the magi: the opening reference to Isaiah's messianic oracle and to Fortunatus' Advent hymn not only announces the traditional Advent theme of the Savior's coming through the workings of the Holy Spirit, it also establishes a metaphorical world where the incarnate Christ, in the guise of the "dew," is first shown in his pre-existent state before implantation as Logos into bodily form. By the fourth line of the poem, the symbolic framework is clear: the "balmy schouris" and heavenly light have special, miraculous properties. Dunbar's is a special, divine sun put in direct contrast to the natural light of "phebus" and the lower stars and planets. It is the uncreated, divine light which was identified generally with God and his offspring in Christian epic poems by the continental poets Dante, Tasso and Du Bartas, but which, in the Christmas hymn of Prudentius, is specifically associated with the Nativity of Christ.¹⁶

Elsewhere, Dunbar exhibits a stylistic deftness that gives his language a more luxuriant quality than that of his medieval predecessors. Dunbar mixes figurative with literal references to nature to suggest the duality of Christ and the intrinsic divinity in the world. Like Dunbar's use of light images, his roll call of heavenly bodies, plants and animals juxtaposes a literal, natural world with the allegorical, supernatural one in which Christ operates. Dunbar often uses the same terms for elements in both natural and divine spheres -- "sun," "flour," "fruyt," indicate not only the Nativity "sun"/star, the heavenly "fruyt" of Mary's womb, the flower of the tree of Jesse or the "flour of flouris," but their literal counterparts on earth. He shuttles rapidly between literal and figurative worlds through the use of puns, the swift catalogues of supernatural

with natural phenomena and their final, surprising equation not as a hierarchy but as one integrated community of the adorers of Christ ("Hevin, erd, se, man, burd and best."). The striking juxtapositions of natural details with religious symbols may be considered a kind of "wit" or rhetorical sophistication not found in the narrative carols and hymns nor the staid hymns to the Virgin.

Dunbar's attempt to aggrandize the infant's birth by turning objects in the world into symbols denoting the divinity in nature and the incarnate Christ can be traced directly to similar images in Prudentius' Nativity hymn. In particular, Dunbar looks to Prudentius' use of light symbolism to denote the magnificent properties of the infant. In Prudentius 8. Kalendar Ianuarias, classical and Scriptural motifs are integrated in the symbol of supernatural light which gradually becomes identified with Christ as risen hero and vanquisher of evil. Prudentius transposes the legend of the sun's eclipse at the crucifixion to the scene of the Nativity and makes reference to the Golden Age suggested in Virgil's 6th "Messianic" Eclogue. In addition, Christ's heroic characteristics are underscored by the insertion of dramatic passages from Revelation into a tableau of the cradle scene, thus suggesting an equation of Christ as divine "sun" and the Christ of the Parousia pictured as consuming holy fire.

...This King, bestowed on all mankind,
 Now cradled in a dismal stall,
 Weak Babe of Virgin Mother born
 With humble midwife's zealous care,

O unbeliever, you will see
 High in the shining clouds of Heaven,
 As you, an outcast, then bewail
 Your guilt with unavailing tears,

When at the awful trumpet's sounds
 The earth will be consumed by fire,
 And with a mighty rush the world
 Unhinged, will crash in dreadful ruin.

Enthroned on high this powerful Judge
 Will grant to each his due reward,
 Perpetual light unto the good,
 And to the lost, Gehenna's fire.

Then trembling at the flaming Cross,
 Judea, you will know your God,
 Whom at your hands Death once devoured
 But afterwards gave back again. (ll. 97-116)¹⁷

To my mind, the luminous Christ of Dunbar's poem, as in Prudentius' above Christmas hymn, has come to mean not simply a historical being and ethical model, but a symbolic moral force permeating the natural and supernatural worlds, weeding out evil from good and responsible for the world's creation and sustenance. In the piercing of night's shadows by the sun's miraculous light, in the vanquishing of the "feindis arrest" by the humble descent of the Son can be seen echoes of Prudentius' might and judgmental infant. Yet Dunbar affirms a redemptive vision of Christ very hesitantly and does not appear to describe the risen Christ-Pantokrater of Revelation as his other, later fellow poets writing on the Nativity and directly influenced by Prudentius do.

Dunbar's hymn should be considered a very cautious adaptation of medieval liturgical materials to a new, symbolic vision of the Nativity theme. Even the language of Dunbar's hymn, though artful and strong in feeling, is far more traditional in its references and disciplined in vocabulary than either Prudentius or his later, 17th century followers. Prudentius' description of the universe in bloom, for example, reflects the classical notion of language as adornment and thus describes the return of spring to the world in the stylized metaphor of nature adorning

and perfuming herself.

Dunbar, on the other hand, describes nature's magical rebirth at the appearance of the infant "sun" with an almost scientific detachment and the plain statement of the Ambrosian liturgical hymn. In Dunbar's poem, spring is depicted with a naturalist's precision: flowers are seen to bloom suddenly from the ground, and, as in nature, climb upwards, unfolding their leaves to the life-giving light.

Similarly, Dunbar's impersonal, lyrically simple Nativity hymn is vastly different from the more rhetorically complex, personal Nativity poems of the 17th century devotional poets. Dunbar's final stanza offers a good example of the difference between his "transitional" liturgical hymn and the more artful, literary hymns of Crashaw and Milton. The final lines of Dunbar's hymn is a powerful embodiment of Christ as generative principle in nature and is the closest depiction before Crashaw's or Milton's Nativity poems of the universe set in tune by Christ's birth. Yet Dunbar's description of the musica mundana is only a brief one and refers primarily to traditional medieval forms of hymnic praise. Dunbar in particular describes the hierarchical universe in harmony very realistically in the manner of an actual body of choristers singing the traditional and ancient hymn of praise of the divine properties of the Son, the Te Deum Laudamus. The content of the concept of heavenly music is unexplored. The description of the harmony in nature, too, is offered in simple, unadorned language and is simply another example among many of the given, absolute order in nature.

Yet in the case of Milton's and Crashaw's Nativity poems, the symbol of universal music is well integrated into the fiction of both poems. Music is a crucial, complex symbol usually paired with its opposite,

discord, to show the paradoxical tensions operating between characters within the poems or between major themes, such as flesh and spirit, belief and unbelief. In Crashaw's hymn, for example, music is a way of defining the main characters Thyrsis and Tityrus, whose final, harmonious chorus resolves their own flyting as well as heaven's and earth's charming rhetorical contention for a fit resting place for the infant. In Milton's "Nativity Ode," music is a way of differentiating divinity from paganism, and the discordant sounds of heathen deities are contrasted with the superhuman, sublime and silent notes of the angels.

Dunbar's hymn, then, still rests firmly on its doctrinal foundations, for it never offers an original, imaginative and suggestive interpretation of the Nativity theme. Rather, like the vernacular psalmodic hymns on the Nativity proper in the Middle Ages which announce the bare fact of Christ's birth upon earth, Dunbar's hymn in incremental repetitions in each stanza simply announces the essential message of the poem: Pro nobis puer natus est. What makes this hymn an important transitional piece from medieval hymn or carol to the more literary treatments of the Renaissance devotional poets is the poem's stylistic excellence. Dunbar skillfully manipulates traditional symbols and orthodox religious themes concerning Advent and the Nativity to suggest that they are more original than in reality. Dunbar, too, is the first poet since Prudentius to sound an authentic, triumphal personal note displacing the penitential, anonymous spirit of the medieval Nativity poems.¹⁹ Although this personal, Sidneyan "lyric" quality of poetic praise still is carefully limited by Dunbar's rather undifferentiated, emotionally disciplined persona, one can sense Dunbar's own religious optimism in the poem. It is probable that the confident tone of the poem has an autobiographical source in that it reveals his acceptance of his

calling as a religious and his reaffirmation of the traditional teachings of the church.²⁰

II

Desiderius Erasmus

A key figure in the development of the Nativity poem from ecclesiastical to Renaissance lyric or heroic verse is the scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Erasmus' influence here does not lie in the realm of literature, however, for he confined his poetic efforts to the writing of a small, relatively undistinguished body of pedantic religious verses in Latin. Yet his lengthy paean to the hovel in Bethlehem, though in Latin, is of immense historical interest in our study of English devotional poetry, for it is the first Nativity poem since Prudentius' 8. Kalendar Ianuarius to emphasize literary allusions and rhetorical techniques imitated from classical authors, a poetic method which is common among all later Renaissance poets treating the theme. In juxtaposing Christian with classical imagery, Erasmus in this poem succeeds in turning the Nativity theme away from the limited context of medieval church doctrine, makes the theme equal with classical moral and mythological themes and thereby places it in the larger tradition of Western belles-lettres dating from classical antiquity. This charming, though bookish, Latin poem is not especially noteworthy for its artistic excellence, yet it does exhibit the growing literary sophistication and stylistic individuality of poets treating the Nativity theme. In theological position, too, it indicates the great shift from medieval penitential Christology to redemptive, ethical Christology that was taking place by the early years of the 16th century.²¹

On the surface, Erasmus' Latin Nativity poem expresses an almost anachronistic tenderness for the life of Christ, especially to the infant Jesus, a devotion which does not seem to conflict with his bitter denun-

ciations of the abuses within the Catholic church. Yet the "medieval" piety of Erasmus with respect to the child Jesus is not marked by cold speculation, but by a lyrical, almost naive tenderness for the Gospels and for the historical Jesus as moral and spiritual exemplar for mankind. Unlike his spiritual mentors, the Brethren of the Modern Life at Deventer in Gouda,²² however, Erasmus chooses to ignore a primary element of medieval Christology: in his fondness for the person of Jesus, he filters out the painful and macabre accretions of Christ as martyr.²³ In Erasmus' eyes, this idealized version of the historic Christ was more primitive, more closely akin to the thinking of the church Fathers and therefore, more authentic and useful than the medieval monastic variety.

His poem on the Bethlehem stable is an interesting attempt to praise the moral worth of Christ using the classical literary technique of epidexis, and turning the Christian tenet of the Nativity into an "ethical myth" similar to classical myths and parables of moral philosophy.²⁴ Although he makes a cursory nod to the Franciscan tradition of the crèche in describing briefly the rudeness of the hut and the winds and showers which buffet it, he concentrates primarily on raising the dignity and grandeur of the infant's surroundings. In a series of elaborate similes, Erasmus indirectly praises the child by praising his setting: the crib is compared to famous sites of royalty in the antique world, all of which the rustic Bethlehem crèche surpasses in beauty and fineness. The classical allusions widen the dimensions of the Gospel story so that the event is seen not literally but as a literary symbol encompassing all of human history, from pagan to Christian times. The Christian story benefits by comparison to the classical sites of former grandeur, for the crèche is seen to be far superior to the most revered sites of learning and kingship, the

palaces of Augustus, Solomon and Croesus, the temples of Jupiter and Egypt.

His ego nonstabilis augusta palatia Romae
 Feliciora iudicem,
 Non (operosa licet) Solomonia templa, nec auream
 Lydi tyranni regiam.
 Salve clara domus, caeloque beatior ipse
 Partus sacrati conscia.

Iure tibi Iovis invideant Capitolia falsi,
 Divis superba saxeis.
 Aegyptus sancta invideat cunabula, mostris
 Finem datura turpibus.* (ll. 10-19)²⁵

Christ, by comparison with his detailed surroundings, is left purposefully an indistinct, mythical character. The few direct references to Christ offered by Erasmus are reminiscent of descriptions of classical heroes like Pan, Apollo and Hercules, all of whom were considered "types" of Christ in the Renaissance or the triumphant, dancing Hellenized Christos in early Christian art.²⁶ Yet Erasmus never departs from the outlines of the actual Gospel narrative: skillfully, he pairs the most impressive heroic, mythological attributes with the most pathetic, infantile Gospel ones. These paired descriptions are Erasmus' imaginative expansions of traditional theological paradoxes for the Nativity (great and small; meek and mighty) through the use of classical motifs. At the very beginning of the poem, the newborn Christ is referred to by these picturesque paradoxes, mixing heroic with infantile features: Christ is the one at whose thunderous birth earth and sky quiver, yet he whispers with soft wails;

*I would not judge the august Palatinate of Rome more blessed than these stables; not the temples of Solomon (howsoever laboriously reared), nor the golden palace of the Lydian tyrant (i. e. Croesus). Hail illustrious home, more blest than heaven itself and conscious of the sacred birth. Well might the Capitol of the pretended Jove envy you, proud (though it be) with its stone-hewn gods. Well might Egypt envy this sacred cradle-- (Egypt) destined to impose an end on her vile monsters.

he is an all-great governor of the immense globe, yet he sucks the breast of the Virgin.

Hic cuius tonitru tellusque tremiscit et aether
 Teneris crepat vagitibus;
 Hic orbis magni moderatur maximus infans
 Virginea mulget vbera.* (ll. 6-9)

The most memorable epithet, by far, is the one extended direct description of the ragged child in his rough manger. Again, Erasmus uses paradoxes denoting the child's greatness and weakness, yet the portrait given is a remarkable, vivid and imaginative pictorialization of the Augustinian Verbum infans, the silent infant Word.²⁷ Erasmus turns the child's inarticulate cries into an immediate figuring forth of the deity. Divinity is here perceived, however, not simply as an emanation or an abstract moral presence incarnate in the world but as a divine robustness (divinus vigor) or as immediate divine action.²⁸ In this particular instance, the child, in crying, is literally seen to spit forth divine flames, like a kind of infant Prometheus, scattering marvelous and awesome gifts from the heavens to the world.

Pannosus iacet in duris praesepibus infans,
 Divinus attamen vigor
 Emicat et patrios vagitu dispuit ignes.** (ll. 32-34)

Although Erasmus' extensive praise of the infant is couched within the fiction of the Bethlehem cradle scene, the scene is yet so marvelously

*Here, the one, at whose thunder earth and sky quiver, whimpers with soft wailings. Here, as an infant, the all-great governor of the great globe sucks the breasts of a virgin.

**In a rough manger lies the ragged child. Yet a divine robustness, nevertheless, flashes forth; in his very crying he spits here and there his father's flames.

re-worked as to distance any semblance to a humanized setting and to eliminate all semblances of human suffering. Even the traditional shivering of the infant is described from a more comforting and stylized perspective as the clustering of cattle around the infant and the relieving of the infant's chill with their warm breath. The rest of the characters in the story, angels, magi, shepherds, and animals alike, intermingle freely and are shown to prostrate themselves before the infant in attitudes of worship and thereby to separate themselves ontologically from the infant who appears so much more elevated than they. The "decent" Joseph lies trembling and kneeling; the shepherds respectfully pipe a rustic tune. Using an epic simile, Erasmus further raises the grandeur of the scene by comparing the worshipful angels to a cluster of bees exalting their new ruler and implicitly suggesting not only the Virgilian promise of a new cycle of history, a returned Golden Age, but also the Christian equivalent-- the birth of a new community of the faithful, the revival of the primitive apostolic Church.²⁹

Aethereique chori volitant cunabula circum
 Ut mensibus vernis apum
 Degenerem simul ac pepulere examina regem
 Regi nove faventibus
 Applaudunt alis sublimemque agmine tollunt,
 Sic turma coelitum, dulci
 Circumfusa suo, gaudens stupet atque iacentem
 Pronis adorat vultibus,
 Et natalitium sonat ad praesepia carmen.
 Coniux pudicus interim
 Fusus humi magnum trepidus venerature alumnum.* (ll. 40-50)

*Ethereal choruses flutter about the cradle. Just as swarms of bees in the month of spring, as soon as they have driven forth some degenerate king bee, applaud their new ruler with favoring wings and exalt him in formation, so the band of heavenly ones, clustered about their chief, rejoicing, marvels at and with downcast faces adore him as he lies; and by the manger, sounds the birthday hymn. The decent husband, meanwhile, prostrate on the ground and trembling, reveres his great fosterchild.

Even Erasmus' final verses on the tender encounter between Christ and Mary is not simply a scene depicting the pathos of suffering infant and mother. Rather, it marks Erasmus' fond, even rapturous adoration of the infant seen through the worshipful eyes of the newly maternal, naive Virgin. The scene, described predominantly naturalistically, is a tenderly human, though idealized drama in which both mother and child are shown to be enamoured of each other, and thus Erasmus underscores the loveliness of both infant and mother.

Porro puella, nobilis
 pars, bona spectaclī, defixis haeret ocellis
 Primumque sese non capit,
 Seque suumque stupens genitrix virguncula partum
 Nulli marito debitum.
 At simul eiecit pietas materna stuporem,
 Praedulce pignus corripit
 Ac modo porrectis prohibet vagire paillis,
 Modo tepente frigidum
 Blanda fouet gremio parvisque dat escula labris.
 Nunc pectori adprimit suo,
 Nunc bleso teneros invitat murmure sonnos,
 Amabili invicem modo
 Laetam prole deo videas gestire parentem
 Prole parente virgine.* (ll. 51-65)

In his prose works, the infant Christ appears as a symbol embodying much of the primitive apostolic Christianity of Erasmus. One of the best-known instances of Erasmus' use of the Nativity in prose is the Latin

*In turn, the young girl, a great part of this illustrious display, is rooted to the spot with down-cast eyes, and at first hardly comprehends herself, a little virgin mother marvelling at herself and her offspring, an offspring not indebted to any husband. But as soon as motherly concern has expelled her astonishment, she snatches up this sweet pledge of divine favor, and now keeps him from crying by extending her breasts, and now gently fondles him when he is cold in her warm lap, and now she presses him to her bosom and now coaxes soft slumbers with her lisping murmur. By turns, you would see the mother, in charming fashion, exult joyfully over her divine offspring, and likewise her offspring in his virgin mother.

declamation to the boy Jesus read to Erasmus' students at St. Paul which is cited below in modern English. Here, Erasmus expounds his notion of Jesus as 'Sermo, as moral enlightener, divine Word or Logos.³⁰ As the principle of order and beauty in nature, Christ's divine essence is most readily accessible to Erasmus' young pupils in Christ's guise of infant in the manger.

Who in all history is like to Jesus, ineffably, inconceivably God of God, born before all times, eternall and fully equal to his eternal and loftiest parent? Does not his human breath easily overshadow that of all kings? By the will of the Father and the breath of the Spirit he was born of a Virgin, a man in time and still God, unsullied by our corruption. Who is richer than he who gives all things and is not diminished? Who more illustrious as the splendor of the glory of the Father, enlightening every man that comes into the world? Who more powerful than he to whom the Father has given power in heaven and on earth? Who more mighty by whose nod the universe was established? At whose nod the sea is calm, species changed, diseases flee, armed men fall on their faces, devils are expelled, rocks rent, the dead raised, sinners repent, and all things are made new? Who is more august whom angels adore and before whom devils tremble? Who more invincible than he who has conquered death and cast down Satan from heaven?...But perhaps boys may better think of him as a boy, lying in swaddling clothes in a manger, while angels sang, shepherds adored, the animals knew him, the star stood over where he lay, Herod trembled, Simeon embraced, Hannah prophesied. O humble simplicity! O sublime humility! How can thoughts conceive or words suffice to express his greatness? Better to adore than to seek to explain. What then shall we do, if John the Baptist said he was unworthy to unloose the latchet of his shoes? Strive, my dear boys, to sit at the feet of Jesus the teacher.³¹

Yet Erasmus' lengthy declamation to the child Jesus was not simply a simplification of the doctrine of the patristic Christus Victor for his immature students. Erasmus appears to find something of great worth in the "sublime humility" of the newborn Christ that dovetailed with his interest in the unformed and pure minds of his pupils. Indeed, the core of Erasmus' thought in ethics, Biblical scholarship and church polity seems to have been centered on a notion of apostolic truth defined as a return to the simplest and best sources of knowledge and embodied in the

purest aspect of Christ, his infancy and childhood. The term renascentia, which he meant in part as a philological requirement for rediscovering in Biblical translations the original text and purest interpretations was meant not only as a way of learning but of Christian life, especially through the moral guide of Christ's life.³²

The opening section of the poem on the Bethlehem hovel especially indicates Erasmus' view of the Nativity as an abstract virtue and symbol for moral perfection: the Nativity is seen to offer a basic, utterly simple moral truth from which even the classical forbears can learn. Thus the pretentious capitol of Jove marked by its ornate, stone-hewn gods and the sumptuous temple of Solomon, like the luxury and artifice of contemporary Renaissance life, stand in direct and shameful contrast to the rustic poverty of the hut. Christ, therefore, appears in his official function as moral exemplar, who, by his poor and humble birth, comes to "un-teach" the pride and luxury that urge men to vileness (dedocere venerit/ Fastum, nullaque non suadentem turpia luxum.). Erasmus in this key line strips away the mystical or eucharistic significance of the birth and emphasizes instead the usefulness of doctrine in perfecting human behavior.

Erasmus' ethical exposition of the Nativity in his de casa natalitia de pueri Jesu reflects the increasingly conceptual interpretations of Christ's person and function in the 16th century. Both humanist and reformer contributed to the idealizing of the newborn Christ. Of special importance to the development of the Nativity poem in the Renaissance was the revival of the patristic notion of the Christus Victor, or redemptive and triumphant Christ (a view which displaced the medieval Man of Sorrows), through the translation and dissemination by early 16th century humanists of the Greek Christian literature of the patristic and

Byzantine periods, often for the first time.³³ Apart from the revival of Latin and Greek works expounding the early Christian notion of the judgmental Christos, Renaissance Protestantism, too, contributed greatly to the idealizing of the Nativity. Anglicans and Puritans alike concurred in their celebration of Christ as Second Adam and in discouraging their peers from taking too much pleasure in the human aspects of Christ.³⁴

The movement from penitential to redemptive Christology was especially apparent in the attenuated lullaby and pietà traditions of the Renaissance. Absent were the fresh, natural vignettes of the Holy Family. And in their place were the few, self-conscious and awkward imitations of lullabies and Marian laments composed by recusant poets like the Elizabethan Richard Verstegn and his Jesuit contemporary Henry Walpole. In Verstegn's lullaby, doctrine is so earnestly set forth that the poem has the serious, heavy handed tone of the 18th century Protestant hymn writers.

...I grieve that duty doth not work
 All that my wishing would;
 Because I would not be to thee
 But in the best I should.
 Sing lullaby, my little boy,
 Sing lullaby, mine only joy.

Yet as I am, and as I may,
 I must and will be thine,
 Though all to little for thyself
 Vouchsafing to be mine.
 Sing lullaby, my little boy
 Sing lullaby, mine only joy.³⁵

In the lullaby, Verstegn has eliminated most of the crucifixion parallels and has emphasized instead the moral import of the birth and the mother's own human sense of sin. Walpole, too, in his Marian lament finds little direct satisfaction in the crucified Christ's suffering. The Passion instead reminds Mary of the sweeter pains of Christ's infancy and the child's ethical instruction of the Virgin in "wisdom, love and grace."

...O how my cross was ever mixt with sweet!
 My paine with joy, mine earth with heavenly blisse!
 Who alwaies might adore my Saviours feete,
 Imbrace my God, my loving infant kisse.
 And give him sucke, who gives the Angels foode,
 And turne my milke, into my Saviours blood.

Sometimes he cast his hand about my necke,
 And smyling, lookt his mother in the face:
 Some joy or skill, I found in every becke,
 Each day discovered wisdom, love and grace,
 I cannot utter what I did espye,
 When I beheld his glorious little eye...³⁶

As the above Passion and Nativity poems indicate, it is Christ the Redeemer, Sermo or moral teacher who is chiefly the protagonist of Nativity poems following the influence of the humanist Erasmus. In this, he was aided by the Christology of the Reformers Luther and Calvin. Yet at face value, it seems that Erasmus' fondness for the infant Christ was initially rejected by the Reformers as anachronistic. In many instances, both Luther and Calvin sometimes seem to condemn the historical Jesus of Erasmus and Erasmus' idealized portrait of mankind.

Luther may have shared with Erasmus a personal fondness for the infant Christ, as his charming Christmas songs for the laity or for his children show.³⁷ Yet his main source for his Christology was not the first three Gospels but the Book of John and the Pauline epistles, all of which affirm a powerful and willful Christ as the being through whom mankind's redemption is accomplished. Luther's notion of faith, too, was based not on the Erasmanian feeling of easy human kinship with Christ but on a despairing separation from him. Luther's Christ was an astounding, strange and frequently cruel king who had to hurt before he could heal. And frequently in the tracts, dramas and pamphlets put out by Luther and his followers for the laity, an awesome, unpredictable, intimidating Christ appears, triumphing over his enemies.³⁸

And this, no doubt, all the prophets did foresee in spirit, that Christ should become the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, blasphemer, etc. that ever was or could be in all the world. For he being made a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, is not now an innocent person and without sins, is not now the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary; but a sinner, which hath and carrieth the sin of Paul, who was a blasphemer, an oppressor and a persecutor; and of Peter, which denied Christ; of David, which was an adulterer, a murderer, and caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord: and briefly, which hath and beareth all the sins of all men in his body, that he might make satisfaction for them with his own blood.³⁹

Calvin, too, found medieval Christology and the identification of dévot with Christ repugnant. Although Calvin was quick to affirm the "unity" of Christ's dual essences, paradoxically, he never accepted Jesus' willing participation in mortality either at birth or death. Rather, Calvin believed principally in Christ's divine nature and its exaltation. Christ's birth and death, then, were magical acts in which divinity was maintained intact and unencumbered by flesh.

Although he united his infinite essence with our nature, nevertheless that was without being enclosed or imprisoned; for he came down from heaven miraculously, in such sort that he still dwelt there; and he was also carried miraculously in the womb of the Virgin, and conversed, and was crucified in such manner that at the same time, according to his divinity, he was filling all the world as before.⁴⁰

Yet as Protestantism came to be disseminated in 16th century England, much of the opposing views concerning Christ's debased or exalted natures according to the Catholics and Reformers tended to be obscured and coalesced into a hazy, unsystematic area of common belief regarding the nature of Christ.⁴¹ For what the Catholic Erasmus shared with the Reformers was a belief in the total ascendancy of Christ, rather than in his humiliation on the cross.

By the late 16th century, humanist clashed with Reformer over the definition of man as either grand and godly or as a worm. Yet both concurred

in defining their God. And Christ in the Renaissance was a magnificent being who reflected the finest moral attributes of God and who became a compelling hero in Nativity poetry.

Erasmus' Latin poem on the Bethlehem hovel is a significant Nativity poem in this century, for it offers one of the earliest Renaissance poetic sketches of the patriarchal Christos, the risen God and moral enlightener who would later appear so much more vividly in the Nativity poem of Milton. Erasmus' techniques in the poem seem to set the pattern for many subsequent Nativity works in the next century: his addition of classical allusions to a Christian story raises the event into the timeless sphere of art and removes it from the eucharistic context of the liturgy or the naturalistic Gospel records of Christ's life.

Erasmus also makes the Nativity poem a truly artful work in Renaissance moral philosophy in that he focuses primarily on the tenet of the Nativity as an exemplum whose main value lies in offering a moral guide for contemporary behavior. The Nativity is used by Erasmus in the same practical manner as the collection of sententiae taken from human observation and experience in his Adagia, or his Gospel accounts of Christ in Enchiridion. Each work becomes an ethical handbook containing human or divine wisdom reduced and purified and offering the dévot specific counsel in how to avoid particular sins, like lust, avarice and pride.

III

Robert Southwell

Dunbar's hymn and Erasmus' Latin panegyric to the hut of Bethlehem are the only significant works in the Nativity tradition of the first half of the 16th century, for they offer sophisticated rhetorical techniques and learned classical allusions rare for church verse on the Nativity theme. These two important transitional works however, are limited by their close ties to the medieval Latin tradition of ecclesiastical poetry and hence lie outside the main corpus of Renaissance belles-lettres. In their rather literal interpretation of the Nativity, too, they appear to be closer to the medieval naturalistic conception of the newborn Christ, although Dunbar and Erasmus aggrandize the bare historical fact of the birth far beyond most medieval poet-clerics.

It is not until the reign of Henry VIII and the remarkable advancement of Tudor lyric poetry that new redemptive interpretations of the Nativity theme begin to appear in the primary literary forms of the period. Up until then, the theme apparently declines in importance in the subsidiary tradition of church poetry. The medieval folk tradition of Nativity poems subsides and in their place, are found polemical minstrel broadsides which survive far into the Puritan regime, even after Cromwell's ban of Christmas.⁴²

The theme, however, evidences a remarkable poetic resurgence at the hands of Tudor lyric poets who celebrate both sacred and profane muses, and begins to appear in popular lyric forms such as the Elizabethan song, the sonnet, the pastoral eclogue, the Horatian ode, and in the poetic meditation, a popular form appropriated from the continental devotional

poets of the post-Reformation Catholic church and frequently combined with lyric forms like the sonnet. Even the ecclesiastical carol tradition of the Middle Ages is revived in Tudor times in a more stylized, contrived form. These poems, however, are actually medieval carol imitations using Christmas themes, the stanza-burden form and simple diction of the medieval carols. They differ from their medieval antecedents in that the Renaissance carols are not popular instructional works, but festive, trivial poems composed and performed for the Tudor aristocracy by court musicians like William Byrd, by the courtiers or even the king himself. Or, they are pious, moralistic songs like Richard Kele's Christmas Carolles (1546) which were printed in songbooks for widespread use by the middle class.⁴³

These popular carol imitations like Byrd's "Lullaby" (Psalms, Sonnets, and Songs of Sadness and Piety, 1588) and "A Carol for Christmas Day" (Songs of Sundry Natures, 1589), are interesting mainly for their continuation in a fairly artificial manner the small tradition of popular religious verse from the Middle Ages. They generally are slight works with little intrinsic literary merit. Nor do they appear to contribute measurably to the development of the finest representatives of 16th century Nativity poems, the Gospel meditations of Robert Southwell and the incarnational sonnets of William Alabaster.

For our study of the 16th century antecedents of John Milton and the other 17th century poets who share his sublime poetic conception of the Nativity, the final decade of the 16th century is the most relevant. It is during the late 1590's that the first belletristic Renaissance Nativity poems are produced, Southwell's meditations and Alabaster's sonnets. These poems offer distinct intimations of the remarkable achievement in lyric or heroic verse of the Nativity poems of the next century. Like the poems

of Donne, Herbert, Crashaw or Milton, these 16th century Nativity poems are stylistically elegant, metaphorically complex and rich in erudition.

In addition, Southwell's and Alabaster's poems present a redemptive interpretation of the newborn Christ without breaking with the penitential view of the birth in the Roman Catholic church. Both men were closely connected with the embattled Catholic church of post-Reformation England. Southwell (1561-1595) was an ardent English recusant and Jesuit priest who may have been deeply involved in Anglo-Catholic intrigue.⁴⁴ Alabaster (1568-1640) studied with the Jesuits and flirted briefly with Catholicism, though he never took orders and later turned to the Anglican faith, ending his life as a much-respected Anglican divine and Latin scholar.⁴⁵ The Nativity poems of both men, written within three years of each other, reveal the degree to which Roman Catholic interpretations of the Nativity in England had become adapted in the last years of the century to Renaissance poetic and philosophical contexts. Obviously, both men were profoundly influenced to a large degree by the tradition of Jesuit meditation in their devotional works. Yet one should also note that Catholic meditation is not the only important feature of these poems. Southwell qualifies his poetic meditations with linguistic additions from the Petrarchan sonneteers and shows an intriguing suggestion of heroic themes. Alabaster shows interesting amalgamations of Spenser's Neoplatonic and Protestant interpretations of Christ as Logos in "An Hymne of Heavenly Love."

In approaching the work of Robert Southwell, most scholars have emphasized the degree to which Southwell's Jesuit background governed his poetry. Such studies have ascribed to Southwell the status of poet-mystic and have emphasized his large debt to the continental Catholic tradition of mystical literature, especially to the prose meditations on the life of

Christ by Ignatius Loyola, Luis de Puente and the Franciscans Bonaventura and Rudolph the Carthusian. Also cited as an important early influence on Southwell's poetry are the rhetorically elaborate poems on the saints or on Scriptural topics by Italian concettists like Marino or the devotional handbook by the 16th century Franciscan mystic Diego de Estella.⁴⁶

Like his Franciscan and Jesuit brethren, Southwell utilizes in his works the major features of mystical meditative verse visible in poets from Richard Rolle to the Italian baroque poets-- passionate, evocative language, elaborate intellectual examinations of religious themes, the description of the dramatic personal encounter with dévot and deity. Yet there is also a noticeable absence of real personal intercourse between poet, Jesus and Mary or of the spirit of conversion that are the true marks of a mystic. For all the obvious, ardent reverence Southwell expresses for the Virgin and Christ, it seems to me that the Nativity poems display an emotional reserve and a didacticism that is more typical in many ways of the medieval carol-composer.⁴⁷

What Pierre Janelle, an early biographer of Southwell, suggests as an interesting critical aside may well be an important key to understanding Southwell's method and theological position in the Nativity poems reaching far beyond Janelle's suggestion: Janelle argues that Southwell expresses a practical approach to religious themes and a linguistic simplicity in his later works that derive perhaps from native English folk-song.⁴⁸ Janelle's rather hesitant observation has actually a much broader use than simply that of measuring the style and tone of the later poems. For even in Southwell's most mannered, expressive works, there is a restrained, ethical quality that negates any affinities he may have with mysticism. The very moment of the poet's apparent intimacy with the deity

is rendered in the poetry with a clinical detachment and scrupulous attention to external detail. In an early "conceitist" work, "At home in heaven," Southwell describes the mystical process from the point of view of observer rather than participant, and, in the didactic, epigrammatic tradition of *Wisdom* literature, he advises his "soul" in how best to achieve illumination:

Queene Hester was of rare and pearlesse hew,
 And Judeth once for beauty fare the vaunt,
 But he that could our soules endowments vew,
 Woulde soone to soules the Crowne of beautie graunt,
 O soule out of thy selfe seeke God alone:
 Grace more than thine, but Gods, the world hath none. (ll. 37-42)⁴⁹

In his Nativity poems, especially, I find that Southwell shows an impersonal, dramatic treatment of the theme that is a far cry from the rapturous communion of Jesuit meditator with infant Christ. Very rarely does he in these poems address Christ directly; rather Southwell relies on striking verbal effects such as lush descriptions, complex conceits, and on a mask of^a consistently humble, self-effacing persona who never ascends to the heights of mystical passion and from whose adoring point of view a glorified conception of the Nativity is conveyed. Whereas the proto-typical Jesuit meditator identifies with his divine subject and is thus able to bask in a kind of reflected glory, Southwell in his poetic meditations on the Nativity concentrates entirely on the aggrandizing of his subject and keeps his persona a rather faceless and emotionally neutral figure. The persona in these poems displays none of the striking individualistic effects of the meditative Nativity poems of Donne and Herbert. Instead, he is cast in the more traditional, undifferentiated role of poet-narrator in the medieval carols, who often entered into the fiction of the carol as a worshipful participant in the adoration scene.

One can compare Southwell's poetic meditation of the crèche in "New

Prince, New Pompe" with the 16th century Spanish mystic Gaspar Douarte's prose meditation on the same scene to see the worldly, impersonal direction Southwell's takes. Douarte, showing the typical fondness for the Nativity among Spanish Catholic mystics during the 16th and 17th centuries, sees the event with awe and reverence for the babe's marks of suffering humanity. He contemplates the "debasement" of Christ into human form with fervent devotion and pleasure and moves into an erotic, ardent communion with the Christ child.

The meditation of the third point will furnish thee of fitt matter to move compassion. If thou consider, howe this moste mightie monarche, this King of al kinges, he whom neither the heavens nor earth can holde and comprehend, hath in such wise debased, humbled and throwen himself downe in a hard manger upon a little haye; he whom the Angels doo adore, and in whose presence the powers of heaven doo quake againe, lieth quaking himselfe for colde betwixt two brute beastes. O divine darling, what meaneth thou this geere?⁵⁰

Southwell, in "New Prince, New Pompe," uses the same traditional images and paradoxes from the liturgy that Douarte does -- the infant as "mighty Monarch," great and small being. Yet the liturgical images, the mystic's oxymorons, are used by Southwell to unravel and emphasize the philosophical dimensions of Christ's Nativity over and beyond the literal sufferings of the child. The poem's opening stanza sets forth the bare facts of the cradle scene, then quickly the poem moves to an emotionally restrained, yet reverent description of the elegant, regal Nativity tableau. At the poem's conclusion, the persona's colloquy is compressed into a matter-of-fact profession of devotion less to the person of Jesus than to the rich articles which denote his divine ministry on earth.

The stable is a Princes Court,
 The Crib his chaire of state:
 The beasts are parcell of his pompe,
 The wooden dish his plate.

The persons in that poore attire,
 His royall liveries weare,
 The Prince himselfe is come from heaven,
 This pompe is prized there.

With joy approach o Christian wight,
 Doe homage to thy King;
 And highly prise this humble pompe,
 Which he from heaven doth bring.⁵¹

Generally, Southwell's Nativity poems all take the form of meditations, yet they may be differentiated according to style and tone: some fall into the category of linguistically uncomplicated verse with a colloquial, direct tone; others are written in a more intellectual, rhetorically elaborate vein. His cycle of 12 didactic, liturgical poems on the life of the Virgin and Christ published in St. Peter's Complaint and re-issued in Meoniae (1595) belongs to the latter category. These poems adopt the form of rosary meditations, a more disciplined, self-contained form of meditation than the Jesuit variety. It is to this group that the poems "The Nativitie of Christ" and "A Child, my Choyce" belong. These works offer stylized, artificial descriptions of the Gospel birth which turn the cradle scene into an ornate, precious setting. The language of these poems is often turgid and unwieldy, emphasizing the artificiality of the poet's rendering of the Nativity scene. Southwell may use the terse diction of the Latin epigram or the liturgical paradox to convey the weighty doctrine of Christ's duality as in "The Nativitie of Christ."

Beholde the father, is his daughters sonne:
 The bird that build the nest, is hatched therein:
 The olde of yeares, an houre hath not outrunne:
 Eternall life, to live doth now beginne.
 The word is dumme: the mirth of heaven doth weepe:
 Might feeble is: and force doth faintly creepe...⁵²

Or, Southwell may adopt the artificial, emotive diction of the Italian concettists like the Italian poet Marino whose work he admired, the result of which is a further de-personalizing of the theme for the

audience.. An example of Southwell's use of aureate diction is the final stanza of "A Child, my Choyce," which prettily enlarges the suffering of the martyred infant Christ by painstakingly and melodramatically describing the babe's "sighes and throbs" in the cradle.

Alas, he weepes, he sighes, he pants, yeat doo his Angels sing:
Out of his teares, his sighes and throbs, doth bud a joyfull spring.
Almightie babe, whose tender armes can force all foes to flie:
Correct my faultes, protect my life, direct me when I die.⁵³

These rosary meditations, however, are hackneyed and overdone and offer nothing truly novel in the way of interpretation or literary depiction of the Gospel Nativity scene. The most interesting and original Nativity poems in Southwell's canon are the straightforward, stylistically plain ones added to the 1602 edition of St. Peter's Complaint by his editor, Gabriel Cawood. Of these four poems, one is on the topic of "Joseph's Amazement" at Mary's pregnancy, a theme popular in Nativity ballads, and three are the topic of the Gospel Nativity narrative.⁵⁴ These three poems, "The Burning Babe," "New Prince, New Pompe" and "New Heaven, New Warre" use the technique of Ignatian meditation to emphasize a redemptive, heroic and ethical Christology, a view which, in Southwell's case, develops out of the celebration of Christ's stark humanity in the meditative tradition itself. In two of Southwell's Ignatian poems, "The Burning Babe" and "New Prince, New Pompe," one can see how the Jesuit method of meditation was particularly conducive to formulating a redemptive notion of the Nativity within the confines of the penitential Catholic liturgical tradition. Where the medieval poetic meditation was largely bereft of imagery and depended on plain statement and the simple address or denotative description of the suffering infant, the Ignatian method, as in these two poems, shows a marked preference for synesthetic imagery and paradox in order to convey the devot's amazement in beholding the dual

natures of Christ. Moreover, the emotion evoked is not simply the affection or pathos of the organized body of the faithful but a more intense and individual sentiment shifting from awe to the dévot's personal despair.⁵⁵

"The Burning Babe" is an interesting adaptation of Ignatian meditation of the "sensible" or realistic variety.⁵⁶ Southwell uses this devotional technique to depict his personal notion of a risen, heroic newborn Christ. The typical Jesuit meditator, however, is rejuvenated by his colloquy with God, frequently assumes some of the divine qualities of his subject and uses images which convey both his own ardor as well as the grandeur of his divine subject. Southwell, on the other hand, as meditator, uses imagery mainly to augment the beauty and magnificence of his subject alone.

In this poem, Southwell's images are taken primarily from the whole range of traditional Catholic Nativity verse. But he combines these images with unusual details from his own imagination to underscore not only Christ's humanity but also his immensity and power and his redemptive mission on earth. The poem uses the symbol of the burning heart, a familiar and by now hackneyed symbol for the lover's ardor in the Petrarchan love sonnets of Surrey and Vaux, with which Southwell was probably well acquainted. Yet when applied to the figure of the zealous mystic, the symbol in religious poetry in general had a rich and meaningful history, dating from its iconographical use as an attribute of St. Augustine's fervent piety⁵⁷ and was used extensively by continental mystics in their meditations. Among them is the Nativity meditation by the Spanish Jesuit Luis de la Puente (cited below in English) which bears a notable thematic resemblance to Southwell's poem.

O that I could enter into his enflamed hart, and see that furnace of infinite fire that burneth therein, and melt in those flames, that issuing forth full of love. I might love as I am loved, and...suffer with love, for him who suffered for me, with so great love! From this interiour love burst forth such exterior sighes and demonstrations, as was sufficient to mollifie a hart more frozen than yce it selfe, and more hard than any marble...O infinit love and immense fire, which the waters of so immense tribulations could not extinguish, but was enkindled the more therewith.⁵⁸

Like Puente, Southwell takes the familiar religious and secular symbol of the lover's "enflamed hart" and places the burning heart into the person of the infant Jesus where the dévot can hear the babe's "exterior" lamentations. Yet Puente only imagines these lamentations and discourses primarily on his own identification with the infant's zeal and his imaginary assumption of the infant's martyred form. For Puente, the point of the meditation is an internal epiphany-- to feel his own heart melt like "yce" and burn with the same unselfish passion.

Southwell, however, manages to keep the child's identity separate from the poet's, for rather than depicting the poet's colloquy with Christ, he chooses to have the child directly address the poet. The burning babe is thus able to exemplify two kinds of mystical revelations without involving the poet actively as a participant of the scene-- an "interior" revelation taking place in the poet's psyche, and an "exterior" one involving the babe alone. Obviously, the babe is an imaginative extension of the poet's affections and intellect, for the poet's heart, like the heart of Puente, is seen to glow with a "sodaine heat." The addition of the ability to disappear to the infant's incendiary powers also underscores the surreal quality of the poem and the depiction of the scene as the poet's personal vision.

The child is an outwardly realistic being who evokes the Catholic Southwell's deep affection for the martyred, crucified Christ. Nevertheless,

the babe also has a more triumphal or heroic personality as well, a feature which has, up to now, gone unnoticed by commentators or has been linked to Southwell's Jesuitical zeal. The burning babe may not be simply an infant auto-da-fé but may also symbolize a "theophany" or the deity's revelation to his chosen disciples. Southwell may have been drawing from examples of holy fire signifying the presence of the deity in Scripture; one can cite, for example, the burning bush and pillar of fire in Exodus, the tongues of flame on the heads of the apostles at Pentecost, the fiery furnace of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. All of these suggest primitive, patriarchal conceptions of the deity as "light of the world" to which Southwell may have been alluding when depicting the incarnate Christ. The babe also resembles somewhat the judgmental infants adorning the walls of early Christian and Byzantine temples which refer to an ancient, patristic notion of Christ as Logos or Judge at the Parousia. Even in Renaissance art, the infant-Pantokrater sometimes appeared suspended in an egg-shaped, flaming "aureole," floating in magnificence above the heavens (sometimes in the company of God as Father and Holy Spirit), just as Southwell's babe hovers weightlessly in the air in a fiery glow.⁵⁹

As I in hoarie Winters night
 Stoode shivering in the snow,
 Surpris'd I was with sodaine heate,
 Which made my hart to glow;

And lifting up a fearefull eye,
 To view what fire was neare,
 A pretty Babe all burning bright
 Did in the ayre appeare;

Who scorched with excessive heate,
 Such floods of teares did shed,
 As though his floods should quench his flames,
 Which with his teares were fed: (ll. 1-12)⁶⁰

The child's own monologue indicates too that he is more than the realistic child in the Gospel Mary's arms. Nor does he narrate Gospel

history as does the child of the Renaissance ballad "The Cherry Tree Carol." At the same time, Southwell's babe is not yet as abstract as the silent infant Word of the Jesuit mystic Puente's meditation. Puente, when he feels his heart burning with love for Christ, is struck dumb and can only utter helpless "sighes and demonstrations." Southwell's child, though a transcendental being, is endowed with a human, historic form. He speaks rationally and eloquently, as poet or prophet, in symbols. And, like a Renaissance preacher, he sidesteps private devotion for public, ethical statements: he leads the poet through the accumulation of images of sacred fire and blood to the elaborate conceit of Christ's heart as furnace stoked by men's souls and to an understanding of Christ's atonement seen from the joyful perspective of Christmas, a feast which bespeaks a hopeful new beginning for the dévot.

Alas (quoth he) but newly borne,
 In fierie heate I frie,
 Yet none approach to warme their harts
 Or feele my fire, but I;

My faultlesse breast the furnace is,
 The fuell wounding thornes;
 Love is the fire, and sighs the smoake,
 The ashes, shame and scornes;

The fewell Justice layeth on,
 And Mercie blowes the coales,
 The mettall in this furnace wrought,
 Are mens defiled soules:

For which, as now on fire I am
 To worke them to their good,
 So will I melt into a bath,
 To wash them in my blood.

With this he vanisht out of sight,
 And swiftly shrunk away,
 And straight I called unto minde,
 That it was Christmasse day. (ll. 16-32)

"New Prince, New Pompe" is a further example of how Southwell utilized

the meditative method to depict the dual nature of Christ while yet remaining personally removed from his topic. The three-stage development of the poem buttresses the transfiguration of the Nativity from historical actuality into a divine reality. Southwell begins with the poet's recalling of the rustic Gospel setting in all its painful detail in the standard Ignatian manner of applicatio sensum. Then he examines intellectually that same familiar scene at the crèche while substituting new, parallel details in line with a notion of the "silly, tender" babe, not as miserable Pauline "suffering Servant" but as the Old Testament Prince of Peace, as Isaiah's view of the messiah conceived of as king, ruler and hero.⁶¹ One by one, he enumerates the details of the Gospel Nativity only to disavow and discount the visible signs of misery and to re-interpret them in a magnificent light. The persona's final, joyful approach of the scene and his obeisance to the "humble pompe" of Jesus translates into the action the poet's affinity with a now glorious martyr, while yet remaining distinctly separate from the Godhead.

...Despise not him for lying there,
 First what he is enquire:
 An orient pearle is often found,
 In depth of dirty mire,

Waigh not his Crib, his wooden dish,
 Nor beasts that by him feede:
 Waigh not his Mothers poore attire,
 Nor Josephs simple weede.

This stable is a Princes Court,
 The Crib his chaire of state:
 The beasts are parcell of his pompe,
 The wooden dish his plate...⁶²

The poem least typical of Southwell's meditational Nativity verse is "New Heaven, New Warre," cited below. It lacks the adoring humble persona and three-stage meditative form of the other Gospel pieces in Meoniae

cast in the Ignatian vein. Yet it is probably the most significant of his Nativity poems, and indeed the finest Nativity poem of the 16th century, for it is an important literary precursor of Milton's Redeemer-child while still affirming nominally the orthodox, penitential Nativity themes of the Roman rite. Interestingly, it displays Southwell as more of a didactic, heroic poet rather than a mystical one: here, for example, he is specifically exploring what Christ does for mankind, or the nature of his ministry on earth, rather than what Christ is, or the combination of innate divinity and mortal dress that comprises Christ's being. It is Christ as powerful and victorious Redeemer on earth rather than the reflexive glory and spiritual rejuvenation that the dévot receives in contemplating Christ's divine essence that is Southwell's main concern.

The poem's organization reflects Southwell's attempts to acknowledge the suffering humanity of Christ while giving emphasis to his aspects as virtuous hero and redeemer. The poem is generally divided into two sections-- a crib scene based on the angelic praise of the child followed by a dissertation on the risen, heroic Christ. Theories have been advanced to explain the poem's puzzling two-part division: Two of Southwell's recent editors, Nancy Pollard Brown and Helen Gardner have construed the poem's division as evidence of two separate pieces put mistakenly under one title by Southwell's first editor. Another editor, Louis Martz, sees the poem also as two separate pieces and as a further example of meditation which often divided the Nativity into two mysteries, the actual birth and the pastoral worship of the child.⁶³

Yet instead of being two separate works (which would be unlikely considering the unity and craftsmanship of Southwell's other poems) or a complicated meditative structure, it may be possible that the poem is an

organic whole in which the second section of Christ as warrior in heaven complements and brings to a climax the first section of the angelic worship of the babe. Despite the change in theme from Nativity to Resurrection, Christ's heroic character seems consistent throughout the poem. In the first section, the baby Jesus appears as a regal, otherworldly presence in the crib.

Come to your heaven you heavenly quires,
 Earth hath the heaven of your desires;
 Remote your dwelling to your God,
 A stall is now his best abode;
 Sith men their homage doe denie,
 Come Angells all their fault supplie.

His chilling cold doth heate require,
 Come Seraphins in lieu of fire;
 This little Arke no cover hath,
 Let Cherubs wings his body swath;
 Come Raphaell, this Babe must eate,
 Provide our little Tobie meate.

Let Gabriell be now his groome,
 That first took up his earthly roome;
 Let Michaell stand in his defence,
 Whom love hath linck'd to feeble sence,
 Let Graces rock when he doth crie.
 And Angels sing his lullabie.

The same you saw in heavenly seate,
 Is he that now sucks Maries teate;
 Agnize your King a mortall wight,
 His borrowed weede lets not your sight:
 Come kisse the maunger where he lies,
 That is your blisse above the skies. (ll. 1-24)⁶⁴

In the second part, the awesomeness of the infant hinted at earlier is enormously expanded through the portraying of Jesus as victor and judge at the Parousia.

This little Babe so few dayes olde,
 Is come to ryfle sathans folde;
 All hell doth at his presence quake,
 Though he himselfe for cold doe shake:
 For in this weake unarmed wise,
 The gates of hell he will surprise.

With teares he fights and winnes the field,
 His naked breast stands for a shield;
 His battering shot are babish cries,
 His Arrowes lookes of weeping eyes,
 His Martiall ensignes cold and neede,
 And feeble flesh his warriors steede.

His campe is pitched in a stall,
 His bulwarke but a broken wall:
 The Crib his trench, hay stalks, his stakes,
 Of Shepheards he his Muster makes;
 And thus as sure his foe to wound,
 The Angells trumps alarum sound.

My soule with Christ joyne thou in fight,
 Sticke to the tents that he hath pight,
 Within his Crib is surest ward,
 This little Babe will be thy guard:
 If thou wilt foyle thy foes with joy,
 Then flit not from this heavenly boy. (ll. 25-42)

Southwell is perhaps the first Renaissance poet to associate the infant martyr of the Gospels with his resurrection as warrior in one entire poem.⁶⁵ In doing so, Southwell combines the more triumphant aspects of Easter with the divine features of the newborn Christ, and thus the traditional Roman Catholic association of Passion with Nativity in terms of Christ's death and suffering is now given a new, optimistic and idealistic perspective. Yet because Southwell uses orthodox, Latin liturgical Crucifixion poems as his models for this poem, he is not accurately interpreted as a classicist like Fletcher or Milton (both of whom break with the Latin liturgical tradition) but a conservative Catholic poet with new insight into traditional liturgical materials.

Southwell's interest in the theme of Christ as warrior may well have reflected a general interest among humanist devotional poets during the 16th century. Erasmus and Dunbar, for example, each wrote separate poems on both the Nativity as well as on Christ as resurrected warrior.⁶⁶ Unmistakably, Southwell is following their example in his identifying the

infant warrior with the descent of the risen Christ into hell to subdue the devil, "to ryfle sathans folde." Thus Southwell's poem in one sense becomes part of a long tradition of poems on Christ's descent, beginning with the Harrowing of Hell legend, its imitation in Latin hymnology by Fortunatus in Ad Felicem episcopum de pasha and the many Latin poems on the triumphant Christ in Hell in the 16th century, in addition to Dunbar's and Erasmus'.⁶⁷

Southwell's militaristic Christ is not a Renaissance hero but a very traditional Roman Catholic figure. Southwell's poem is vastly different in conception and form from what I take to be the main Elizabethan poem on Christ as warrior, Spenser's classical Christ-Sapience in "An Hymne of Heavenly Love" (1596). Spenser's poem depicts Christ as victorious over the fallen angels and, in part, influences Fletcher and Milton in their portrayal of Christ triumphant over the heathen gods. By contrast, Southwell's sources for his militaristic babe are the Easter descent poems and also the liturgical formulae or meditations on the Passion portraying Christ as a wounded knight whose strength derives out of his weakness and whose battle equipment is compared to his wounds.

There are interesting resemblances especially between this poem and medieval crucifixion poems on the poet and Christ as knights. Southwell's poet vows to join with Christ "in fight" in a manner reminiscent of the medieval Christ-knight who in one 14th century poem subdues the devils in hell and vows to "fith withouten seld and spere."⁶⁸ There is also an interesting resemblance between "New Heaven, New Warre" and another medieval crucifixion meditation quoted below in which the dévot professes to take on Christ's "armor" by assuming Christ's wounds. In both instances, the minute examination of Christ's passive suffering on the cross or in the

cradle is turned into a more satisfying, symbolic description of Christ or the dévot as aggressive assailants of the devil. Southwell's newborn warrior is seen to have a possible ancestor in the medieval meditator's imaginative reworking of Augustine's "Candet nudatum pectus" into Paul's notion of the active, striving Christian knight in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

þe fend me tempteb dai & nygt,
 he wol me reue heuene brigt,
 þat he les þorw his pride;
 swete ihesu, y am þy knigt,
 azenus him y take þe figt,
 stifli him to abide.

At þe ye mot myn armes borwe,
 Mi sheld shal be þe swerd of sorwe,
 marie þat stong to þe herte;
 þe holi cros my baner biforn,
 myn helm þi garlond of sharpe þorn,
 Mi swerd þi scourges smerte.

Mi plates shullen þi nailles be,
 myn acotoun þat spere tre,
 þat song þi swete syde.
 Now y am armed þus wel,
 nel y him fle neuere a del,
 tyde what bi-tyde!...

Swete ihesu, for loue of me,
 þou henge upon þe rode tre,
 harde fastned wip nailles pre,
 þi swete bodi by-swonge;
 for loue þou þoledest woundes depe,
 þin hondes þerled, and eke þi fete;
 þu modir blodi geres lete--
 she saug þi herte stoonge,
 þi swete bodi al on a flod,
 out of þy syde water & blod,⁶⁹
 and ran down to grounde....

Although the most interesting part of the poem in our discussion of Southwell's use of the Nativity theme is the second militaristic section because it adapts Easter descent features to a cradle setting, one cannot separate it from the first section of the poem on the angels' worship of the child. Southwell doesn't merely attach a "Miltonic" or warlike Nativity

passage to a Nativity lullaby: he makes the character of Christ consistent in each part so that the martial episode of the baby Christ victorious in hell or heaven is a stirring climax to the cradle scene.

Both sections of the poem create an integrated, symbolic setting for the Nativity by merging the creatures populating the divine world with those of the real world. Christ as earthly babe and heavenly warrior is part of both. In the first part, he is a helpless baby who yet retains his divine powers. His godliness is made more keenly human by the obeisance of his angel-servants who leave their places in the sky and who appear in human guise as groom, steward, guard and nurse. Christ's descent into flesh becomes an almost natural process of human maturation when conceived within the new "fiction" of the cherubim and seraphim who worship him not in the heavens but at the manger itself. Every detail evokes Christ's joint, harmonious and tangible divinity and humanity; even the traditional image of Christ at Mary's breast is used not simply to induce pathos but as a corollary for his divine traits.

The same you saw in heavenly seate,
 Is he that now sucks Maries teate;
 Agnize your King, a mortall wight,
 His borrowed weede lets not your sight:
 Come kisse the maunger where he lies,
 That is your blisse above the skies. (ll. 19-24)

The subsequent transformation in the second section of Christ from infant in the cradle to mighty warrior comes with little surprise. Through the Roman Catholic habit of seeing the Nativity as a mirror image of the Passion, Christ's might is seen to proceed from those very realistic Gospel themes of weakness and poverty introduced in the first cradle section. Like the detailed conceits in "The Burning Babe," Southwell minutely investigates the object human sources and penitential character of the infant's divine strength-- his tears are his weapons; his naked breast his shield;

his shivering limbs the "ensigns;" his weak flesh his warrior's charger.

But it is obvious that Southwell's infant Christ is very different from the Knight-Christ of Catholic meditations or liturgical formulae. Southwell's babe's battlefield is not hell, nor the sorrowful cross, but the world-at-large. And he is portrayed as supremely victorious, unlike the Latin Passion poems showing Christ the warrior wounded and grieving and "winning" the field by sacrificing the battle. Much of Southwell's Jesuit training had stressed day-to-day life in terms of an ethical battle. And it is this personal, contemporary English moralistic fervor, in addition to his continuing devotion to the militaristic Christ of the Roman Catholic tradition, which influenced his conception of the Nativity in this poem.⁷⁰

Southwell's three major Nativity poems, "The Burning Babe," "New Prince, New Pompe" and especially "New Heaven, New Warre" are interesting amalgamations of naturalistic aspects of the Nativity derived from the Gospel and Catholic liturgy and meditations with new, idealistic features of the Nativity seen from the perspective of redemptive history. Southwell's poems show how the redemptive notion of the Nativity formulated by the 16th century Italian humanists in their religious epics and eclogues could be accommodated to the penitential Catholic view of the Nativity: by using traditional liturgical paradoxes and the oxymorons of the Renaissance mystic, he gives both human and divine aspects of Christ equal, pictorial emphasis and manufactures out of traditional Latin lyrics on the warrior-Christ on the cross a regal, sometimes warlike newborn deity who looks directly ahead to Milton's "great Babe."

IV

William Alabaster

William Alabaster (1568-1640) is unlike the earlier 16th century poets writing on the Nativity theme in that he was, for most of his early life, a layman uncommitted to a particular religious sect. Thus, he does not express the same traditional devotion to the physical presence of Christ in the crib as does Dunbar, Erasmus and Southwell, all of whom were formally trained in Roman Catholic doctrine. Yet Alabaster is far more representative of the eclectic, flexible religious and ideological attitudes of the Elizabethans than his theologically conservative contemporary, Robert Southwell. His important religious sonnet-cycle on Gospel themes, 11 of which treat the topic of the Incarnation in Mary's womb, was composed during the brief period (1597-98) in which he turned from Puritanism to Catholicism, before his final conversion to Anglicanism. These poems show the diverse influences in his religious career in that they are unorthodox, syncretistic pieces exploring the idea of the Incarnation by re-working traditional symbols from the Roman liturgy and by adding new, original conceits dealing with the incarnate Christ taken from Renaissance Neoplatonism or from everyday life.

These 11 sonnets are significant in our study of the Nativity theme of the 16th century because they demonstrate how earlier Elizabethan poets, like Alabaster, helped to forge the poetic of Donne and Herbert. They are also important in themselves, for they are ingenious, sometimes masterful works which serve to advance the theme artistically in this century. Alabaster does not use the Nativity theme merely to assert a Scriptural or a doctrinal lesson but to create decorative literary effects and to pose ingenious philosophical problems. The poems, therefore, provoke the reader

with their graceful wit and vivid images as well as with their poet's religious convictions. Because of the poems' detachment of the theme from its orthodox Gospel or liturgical foundations in church literature, the theme loses much of its formal realistic features and Passion-centered morbidity that had characterized most serious Nativity verse until Southwell. Rather, the theme achieves a more flexible level of intellectuality and a refinement of style that prefigures the Nativity poems of Henry Vaughan.

If one could place Alabaster into the tradition of vernacular Nativity poetry dating from the 14th century, one could see clearly resemblances with the liturgically influenced carols of the 15th century which dealt with the Incarnation through symbols and in argumentative paradoxical language. Yet the medieval cleric-composer was not concerned with graceful diction nor with deciphering the "hidden knowledge" of God. Alabaster's sonnets, however, use literary techniques such as complex extended metaphors and dramatic monologues to convey a sense of dramatic immediacy and a more unified poetic structure in the poems to demonstrate the rational process by which the Incarnation becomes known to the poet's mind. What Alabaster investigates in his sonnets is the incarnate Christ as symbol rather than as realistic human being. The abstract Christ is especially visible in the eleven sonnets on the Incarnation. These are logical exercises avoiding the biographical narratives of Mary and Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels for the more rational elucidation of the Incarnation as mystery, as the idea of God's descent into human shape. Even the one sonnet on the actual Gospel story of Christ's birth never endows the figure of Christ with tangible human features: the indescribable "worth" which Christ assumes at his birth is depicted as an adornment, as a transformation

of humanity into a more glorious and magnificent article, like the tempering of iron by fire.

In this Nativity sonnet, the name of Jesus, which was venerated as if it were a holy relic in the Middle Ages, and repeated by the medieval mystic to evoke an apprehension of Christ's martyred presence in the mind, is here so mysterious a property that the poet can scarcely speak it. All he can utter is the bare fact of Christ's descent into mortal form, "Jesus is born." Church doctrine cannot be immediately recalled by the poetic recreation of the Nativity story of the Gospels; even the mystic's use of Jesus' name as a magical charm is insufficient in conveying the huge mystery of the Incarnation and Nativity. The repeated statement, "Jesus is born," must evoke the historicity of Christ as well as his larger, official role in the redemption of mankind.

Jesus is born. Peace, such words forbear,
Which only angels' mouth deserves to unfold.
Then let them speak these mysteries enrolled.
Ay me, they must be sung of that sweet choir.
Then let mine ears that blessed carol hear,
No, only holy Shepherds be so bold,
With joy then let them hear this uncontrolled.
Nor so, for holy shepherds hear with fear.
Ay me, that unworthy him to name,
Yet none so worthy to be named as he,
Ay me, unworthy for to hear the same,
Yet nothing so deserveth heard to be.
What then? Compare both these, his worth, my scorn;
His far weigheth down: Jesus is born.

Although the idea of the Nativity as mirabilem mysterium was a commonplace theme throughout the literature of the medieval church, Alabaster in this sonnet seems to be expressing a more Protestant variant of that tenet. This can be seen in the poem's interesting devotional rendering of the theme of language's inadequacy in revealing deep sentiments, a theme familiar in Elizabethan love poetry. One can compare the above sonnet with Sonnet No. 1 from Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel and Stella, a poem similar in

argument. In Sidney's sonnet, the poet-lover professes to reject his Muses' aid and the "sug'ring" of his speech for the simple, direct technique of "naming her whom I do love."⁷² In both works, the name of the beloved possesses magical properties, and, once uttered, directly bodies forth universals, as does the deity's utterance of the Word or Logos at creation.

However, Alabaster is here not simply describing a religious version of the Renaissance love-poet's forswearing of the poet's flowery rhetoric for the more moral, unassuming plain style. Alabaster's view of language's inadequacy is much more similar to Herbert's in "Jordan II," a later poem which touches upon the Protestant notion of grace, a notion emphasizing man's incapability of reaching God through human means, "quaint words and trim inventions." Both Herbert and Alabaster depict not a rhetorical or artistic pose but the Pauline Caritas, an important precept in the theology of Luther and Calvin who emphasize the incomprehensibility of a voluntaristic God and the futility of man's efforts to achieve a self-motivated union with him.⁷³ Just as Herbert's persona ends by accepting a hieroglyphic rendering of a truth "readie penn'd" through the imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing love, so Alabaster concludes that the ontological separation of man from God must be bridged neither by language nor by man's adoration but by God's efforts alone, through the Incarnation and atonement of Christ. It is the deity who initiates all worthwhile action and, who, in Alabaster's last line, bestows the understanding of Christ's birth to an unwitting poet who has exhausted his efforts to speak or to hear the Savior.

In her commentary on the sonnet-sequence, Helen Gardner has made the important observation that Alabaster was an early exponent of the

Metaphysical school of poetry. She argues convincingly that Alabaster's sonnets on the Incarnation, like his one lone sonnet on the Gospel Nativity, generally share the disciplined rhetoric, controlled, intricate expansion of conceits and self-deprecating personae of Donne's Divine Meditations and especially of some of Herbert's religious lyrics. This occasional "Herbertian quality," according to Gardner, is generally not shared by the other sonnets of the sequence, most of which are tendentious, doctrinal pieces and which have been praised for their religious feeling, but found wanting as poetry.⁷⁴ In many of these other sonnets, Alabaster employs paradoxes and conceits which are largely artificial and contrived and do not contribute to an integrated poetic design. Many of them fall short at the conclusions and become engaged in expanding a lengthy conceit rather than clearly delineating the point of the theme.

The weak conclusions found elsewhere in the sonnet-sequence, particularly in the poems on the Passion, are not, however, a feature of the incarnational sonnets which seem to merit Professor Gardner's praise as most difficult but best-constructed of the lot. These, like Herbert's best lyrics, reach a tone of affirmation and repose: the poet ceases to argue intellectually with God and instead exclaims at the grandeur and ineffability of God and the Son. Alabaster's final couplets seem particularly effective in the sonnets on the Incarnation, for like Herbert's conclusions, they unwind the sustained, often difficult conceits for the reader with a neat, epigrammatic twist.

In examining the sonnets of Alabaster, Helen Gardner offers valuable proof that his "Metaphysical" diction derives from the liturgical and meditative tradition of Latin verse in the Catholic church.⁷⁵ Gardner's findings do much to clarify the symbols and 3-part logical structure of

Alabaster's sonnets. Yet Professor Gardner does not fully explore the complex Elizabethan poetic origins of Alabaster's verses. In addition to the immense influence of liturgical and meditational poetry as suggested by Gardner, there are other interesting, though slight literary influences from Edmund Spenser's Neoplatonic and Protestant Fowre Hymns, especially the third hymn directed to the pre-existent Christ, "An Hymne of Heavenly Love." Thus dual Catholic and Renaissance literary parentage of Alabaster's incarnational sonnets make them a much richer and more complicated amalgamation of popular Renaissance interpretations and attitudes toward the doctrine of the Incarnation and Nativity of Christ than has hitherto been acknowledged.⁷⁶

As Helen Gardner has shown, Alabaster's brief training as a Jesuit and the fondness for Latin devotional literature which he displayed throughout his lifetime is present in the great majority of the incarnational sonnets: these treat the Incarnation through metaphors which are frequently witty adaptations of the traditional epithets and paradoxes by which Christ was depicted in the Roman Catholic liturgy--Christ as a unity of dual essences (54); as both base and divine being (59); as Alpha and Omega (63); as a lawyer pleading his case (60).⁷⁷

One should also note, however, that the strong thematic connection between Alabaster's poems and the Roman Catholic liturgy is also evident when one compares the sonnets to a small group of 15th century theological carols treating the Incarnation abstractly in an argumentative, didactic manner.⁷⁸ The carols use copia or lists of traditional paradoxes from Latin hymns or sermons relating to the birth as the primary rhetorical technique by which the Incarnation is defined. This technique seeks to investigate a problem not by careful analysis of the proposition but by

the sheer accumulation of evidence. The carols are also couched in the question-answer form of Scholastic casuistry and come to the general conclusion of man's inadequate reason when faced with an illogical mystery of God's.

A God and yet a man?
A mayde and yet a mother?
Witt wonders what witt Can
conceave this or the other.

A god, and Can he die?
A dead man, can he live?
What witt can well replie?
What reason reason give?

God, truth itselpe, doth teach it;
Mans witt senckis too farr vnder
By reasons power to reach it,
Beleeve and leave to wonder.⁷⁹

Alabaster's sonnets, like the 15th century philosophical carols, often use the technique of catalogues of paradoxical epithets for the incarnate Christ, and generally, all refer to the familiar TOPOS of man's limited understanding. Yet the sonnets are also direct reflections of Renaissance Catholicism, in particular, the casuistical reasoning of the Jesuit mystics, who delve deeper than the medieval philosophical carols do in an emotional and rational exploration of the dogma of the birth. If one compares the structure of the carols with that of the sonnets, one can see how Alabaster's metaphors and paradoxes lead toward an integrated agreement and well-orchestrated devotional experience. Where the organization of the carols is in the form of riddles or aphorisms emphasizing the distinctiveness of each separate paradox, the paradoxes of Alabaster's sonnets are couched in the sustained dialectic of Ignatian meditation which moves in a 3-part process, touching the dévot's memory, intellect and will. Even the sonnet most like the 15th century incarnational carols in terms of form appears to have an integrated logic. The strings of paradoxes are arranged

from least to most complex and mysterious and depend on the final couplet which announces God as the magical property binding the discrete elements together.

By what glass of resemblance may we see
 How God and man, two natures, meet in one?
 Or is it like unto that union
 Whereby the soul and body do agree?
 Or like as when a graft of foreign tree
 Grows in some other by incision?
 Or like as when about one diamond
 Two rings are fasten'd which one jewel be?
 Or as when one same party is both man
 And is together a musician?
 Or like as iron is unbodied
 With interfused fire into one mould?
 No, no, for these resemblances are dead.⁸⁰
 How are they then conjoined? As God would.

One can further cite Alabaster's alteration of the liturgical paradox in the light of Renaissance redemptive theology by comparing his use of the technique to that in the carols. The paradoxes in the carols were theological puzzles meant to amaze rather than to be solved in the manner of Christ's riddles to the devils in hell. Or, they were traditional paradoxes drawn directly out of the Passion-centered liturgy which focus on Christ's suffering rather than on his divine accoutrements.⁸¹ The end of the liturgical paradox, like the partaking of the eucharist or the medieval meditation on the life of Christ was the dévot's anamnesis or inciting of memory and affections for the humanized Christ of the Gospels and the corollary feeling of kinship, pity and love for his martyred presence.

Alabaster's paradoxes, like those of Jesuit meditators or the later metaphysicals Donne and Herbert, are not meant simply to cause the reader to identify with the historic Christ but to appeal to and stimulate the reader's intellect and to make him marvel at the deity's transcendence. In the poem, the paradox has become the unifying structural principle, depicting again how God's love, Caritas can solve, or make whole, contending

and seemingly illogical ideas. Frequently, one gets a sense of Alabaster's delight in the elucidation of the paradox or conceit simply for their rhetorical effect. In addition to traditional liturgical paradoxes, Alabaster frequently employs lengthy metaphors explaining through ingenious allusions to contemporary art, politics and science the dévot's understanding of a religious mystery. Sometimes, what appears to be originality is simply the updating and reworking of an antique, orthodox metaphor, as in Sonnet 62, which renders the symbol of Christ as artisan of the universe or as the deity's Second Cause into an artist's portrait. The general metaphor for Christ's creative attribute then becomes a particular symbol for the incarnate Christ-- Christ's divinity is the picture within and his natural essence the ornate frame, which embellishes and complements the real presence and is in turn the artistic product of Christ's "workman's power."

God and man, though in this amphitheatre
 Are many works with beauty varnished,
 Yet all for thee, by thee were polished,
 And first intended by the world's creator;
 Like as a picture of fair grace and stature
 That with a margent is embroidered,
 Wherein are thousand smaller fancies spread,
 Thou art the picture, and the border nature.
 Not that the world is ornament to thee,
 But thou to it that daignst therewith to be;
 Yet as a step it doth thy greatness show
 And workman's power, whose art so high could rise
 In thee, and in thy border fall so low,⁸²
 No border unto thee, but to our eyes.

From the above example, one can see that Alabaster uses the paradox and the conceit not simply to transmit dogma or a sense of the dual essences of Christ but also to enhance his argument and to enrich his diction.⁸³ In Alabaster's poems, imagery is used to evoke a sense of the deity's power and to convey through the rational expansion of metaphor the dévot's awe in the face of such divinity.

Medieval imagery, too, involved the perception of an intellectual as well as literal truth. But in the poems on Christ's life, the emphasis was by far on the naturalistic representation of scenes from the Gospels. Even one of the most imagistic and allegorical medieval poems on the Incarnation, "The Mayden Makeles," dramatizes the dogma of Christ's descent through a dramatic confrontation of two clearly realized characters. The poem offers a charming bucolic tableau with discreet physical overtones depicting through the fiction of a courtly romance rendezvous or wedding scene from the allegorical Song of Songs the intimacy between the Biblical Mary and Jesus.

If one can generalize from the above medieval poem, one can see that medieval religious verse conventionally begins with the literal or allegorical dramatization of a specific scene in Christ's life. By contrast, Alabaster's meditational sonnets on the Incarnation leave to the reader's memory of Scriptural scenes the actual fleshing out of visual details of the poem's main theme. Traditional symbols denoting the glorious Christ of the Resurrection, especially, are frequently divorced from their particular Scriptural context and expanded into the mini-allegories so favored by Puritan preachers depicting the myth of redemption from man's fall to his achievement of Zion through Christ as Second Adam.⁸⁴ Each incarnational sonnet reviews this redemptive cycle-- there is a similar omniscient persona in each poem who retells the same legend: how God's unabiding love for man was communicated to a post-lapsarian world through Christ's love at the Incarnation.

Frequently, the sonnets depict the epic of Christ's Incarnation and Atonement of sinful man by superimposing new fictional details upon a traditional Scriptural symbol. In Sonnet 59, for example, the symbol of

Christ as torch or flintstone, which derives from Christ's pronouncement of his ministry in Luke 12:49 ("I am come to set fire upon the earth."), is transformed into an updated Promethean myth. Christ's assumption of human form is compared to his bringing a 3-fold pyre to earth composed of the virtues of love, likeness and merit. Yet the myth ends unhappily for mankind, however, for all three flames are unsuccessful in kindling "desire" in men's souls prompting them to salvation. And thus, the allegory presented in the sonnet ends with the present ill effects of Christ's Incarnation and ministry on earth.

God longed for man's love, and down was sent
 Christ Jesus from the bosom of his Sire,
 To cast abroad the flames of heavenly fire,
 To kindle love in our base element.
 He came and took humanity unblent,
 And made a lamp thereof whose threefold pyre,
 Love, likeness, merit kindle up desire
 In them whose souls are with those sparkles brent.
 Love doth deserve regard, and yet we move not,
 Likeness doth cause respect, and yet we love not,
 Merit of bounty and such goodness rare
 Might leave the taste of kindness, but we prove not.
 Why we should love are many causes spare,
 But why we shouldn't, or how we should, none are.⁸⁵

As Helen Gardner has suggested in her preface to the edition of Alabaster's works, the metaphysical qualities of Alabaster's verse are easily detectable in his intricate, dialectical method and use of ingenious, frequently traditional metaphors for Christ's Incarnation. However, it seems to me that what scholars like Professor Gardner have not touched upon are the contemporary literary influences in Alabaster's work. We have already seen in the above sonnet, evidence of the themes of Christ as Second Adam or of the Christian life as a difficult journey or battle for salvation, themes made familiar by Puritan preachers and polemicists. There is another, more important literary influence on the incarnational sonnets, untreated by critics, without which the movement of 16th century devotional verse

from the liturgical hymn of Dunbar to the witty meditational lyrics of Southwell and Alabaster could not have been accomplished. This is Edmund Spenser's "An Hymne of Heavenly Love," an important philosophical poem which lies outside the doctrinal tradition of church verse and which combines features from Renaissance Neoplatonism and Elizabethan Calvinism. I hope to show that Alabaster's incarnational sonnets, for all their obvious structural and rhetorical relationship to Jesuit meditations, the liturgy and to the school of Donne, are partly indebted to this poem for its philosophically eclectic view of the incarnate Christ and its unique and moving treatment of Christian love.

Spenser's third "Hymne" is not composed specifically for the feast of Christmas and hence lies outside our study. Yet it is the most important Renaissance model for Nativity lyrics celebrating the Renaissance Christos used by 17th century poets like Fletcher, Milton and Vaughan. In addition, it integrates all major strands of Nativity themes up until the end of the 16th century-- the deliberate and traditional identification of Jesus with Neoplatonic and Hebraic formulations of Wisdom and Love with the medieval devotion to the historic Christ and with Calvinist notions of grace .

Apart from Alabaster's sonnets, Spenser's influence is primarily felt among Elizabethan poets writing on the Nativity in the manner of the Christian pastoral. Edmund Bolton's "Shepherd's Song," widely circulated in England's Helicon (1600), for example, is neither carol nor hymn but a pastoral eclogue apparently imitating the encomium method and musical phrasing of Spenser's "Aprill" eclogue of the Shepherds Calendar. More important, it is dependent on Spenser's description of the abstract, pre-existent Christ in the third "Hymne" for its rendering of the Nativity. In

Bolton's poem, Christ is never given vile form but appears only as a vast, unspecified light blinding even the created stars, just as Christ before his birth in Spenser's poem appears in the heavens surrounded by a "thousand lamps of burning light" and sits enthroned as "God's brightest angel, even the Child of Light."⁸⁶ At the poem's end, when the poet-shepherd calls upon his brethren to leave for Bethlehem, uncreated holy light is fixed not into the bodily form of Jesus but into a more glorious natural form, the Nativity star. Even this metamorphosis of primal into natural light is considered still a humiliation of sorts. It is as if Bolton could not quite admit to Jesus' partaking of the Christian doctrine of creation out of primordial chaos and found the heretical notion of creation ex deo much more satisfying, given the grandiose figure of the mewborn "great Shepherd, an infant full of power."⁸⁷

Lo, how the firmament
 Within an azure fold
 The flock of stars hath pent,
 That we might these behold.
 Yet from their beams proceedeth not this light,
 Nor can their crystals such reflection give.
 What there doth make the element so bright?
 The heavens are come down upon earth to live.
 But hearken to the song.
 "Glory to glory's King,
 And peace all men among."
 These choristers do sing.
 Angles they are, as also Shepherds be
 Whom in our fear we do admire to see.

"Let not amazement blind
 Your souls," said he, "annoy;
 To you and all mankind
 My message bringeth joy,
 For lo, the world's great Shepherd now is born,
 A blessed babe, an infant full of power;
 After long night uprisen is the morn,
 Renowing Bethlehem in the Saviour."
 Sprung is the perfect day,
 By prophets seen afar;
 Sprung is the mirthful May,
 Which winter cannot mar.
 In David's city doth this Sun appear,
 Clouded in flesh, but, shepherds, sit we here?⁸⁸

Where Bolton uses Spenser to convey a largely Neoplatonic rendering of the birth, Alabaster extracts a combination of Neoplatonism and Calvinism in depicting an awesome Christ as agent of divine grace and particularly in expounding the praise of the self-sacrificing love of Jesus who embodies God's "amatory" essence.

Like Spenser's third "Hymne," two of Alabaster's sonnets⁸⁹ are primarily concerned with Christ's unabated, self-sacrificing love for mankind and follow Spenser's amalgamation of Neoplatonic with Christian versions of love in the elevation and aggrandizing of Jesus as Christos. Sonnet 56, Incarnatio est Maximum Dei Donum, possibly the best of the entire sequence, is especially close to Spenser's third "Hymne" and seems to draw its description of God's and Christ's relationship at the Incarnation from the passages in Spenser's "Hymne" on God's creation of the pre-existent Son and of his "second brood," mankind (ll. 22-112).

In particular, Alabaster's and Spenser's accounts of creation employ the metaphors of sun's rays and flowing fountain which were used recurrently by theoreticians of the Neoplatonic and Biblical Logos. These metaphors, with all their philosophical underpinnings, were familiar to most Renaissance readers as evocations of the properties of the Trinity as well as of the doctrinal conception of the Son.⁹⁰ Renaissance religious thinkers, like Richard Hooker, however, applied the dual images also to the creative power of God emanating from the Logos into all created things,⁹¹ and it is in this latter sense that both Spenser and Alabaster employ the images in their poems. Moreover, each poet inserts a Calvinistic twist into the images: Spenser's "Eternall Fount" bubbles over with so much love and goodness that it overflows not only into abstract emanations on the ladder of perfection but also into Protestant "grace"-- more specifically, into the creation and

installation of mankind in the world to fill the space lost by Lucifer and his band.

But that Eternall Fount of love and grace,
 Still flowing forth his goodnesse unto all,
 Now seeing left a waste and emptie place
 In his wyde pallace, through those angels fall,
 Cast to supply the same, and to install
 A new unknownen colony therein,
 Whose root from earths base groundworke should begin. (ll. 92-98)

Alabaster, too, in Sonnet 56, uses the metaphor of the "fountain of light" to symbolize the permeation of God's bounty throughout the world, as well as the particular culmination of his bounty in the illumination of God in the man's physical and rational properties and especially in the Incarnation. In this sonnet, the old Neoplatonic dichotomy of spirit and matter does not emerge; nor is there the traditional New Testament theme of kenosis or Christ's emptying himself of divinity. Rather, the Protestant God's down-reaching love for man neatly complements the Neoplatonic ascending universe: instead of man yearning for union with God, the hierarchy is toppled, and it is God who feels violently pulled to earth until he literally "spends" himself with bestowing divine treasure in the birth of his son on earth. And thus the paradox of the Word-made-Flesh is ingeniously dramatized as an instance of God's overwhelming generosity or helpless magnetic attraction for mankind.

Like as the fountain of all light created,
 Doth pour out streams of brightness undefined,
 Through all the conduits of transparent kind,
 That heaven and air are both illuminated,
 And yet his light is not thereby abated:
 So God's eternal bounty ever shined
 The beams of being, moving, life, sense, mind,
 And to all things himself communicated.
 But see the violent diffusive pleasure
 Of goodness, that left not till God had spent
 Himself by giving us himself, his treasure,
 In making man a God omnipotent.
 How might this goodness draw our souls above,
 Which drew down God with such attractive love!⁹²

Spenser's third "Hymne," too, cannot wholeheartedly conceive of the physical manifestation of the heavenly Christ, and those few passages on the physical birth in Bethlehem are, in one case, an uneasy argument defending God's imposition of "fleshly slyme" upon the Son.

Out of the bosome of eternall blisee,
 In which he reigned with his glorious Syre,
 He downe descended like a most demisse
 And abject thrall, in fleshes frail attyre,
 That he for him might pay sinnes deadly hyre,
 And him restore unto that happie State
 In which he stood before his haplesse fate... (ll. 134-140)

What hart can feele least touch of so sore launch,
 Or thought can think the depth of so deare wound,
 Whose bleeding sourse their streames yet never staunch,
 But stil do flow, and freshly still redound,
 To heale the sores of sinfull soules unsound,
 And clense the guilt of that infected cryme,
 Which was enrooted in all fleshly slyme? (ll. 163-169)

Or, in another example, Spenser's view of the Gospel birth is a precious, sketchy treatment of the stable scene.

Beginne from first, where he encradled was
 In simple cratch, wrapt in a wad of hay,
 Betweene the toylfull oxe and humble asse,
 And in what rags, and in how base array,
 The glory of our heavenly riches lay,
 When him the silly shepherds came to see,
 Whom greatest princes sought on lowest knee. (ll. 224-231)

Alabaster, however, never compromises the ecstatic tone and philosophical quality of his sonnet with a description of the actual birth in Bethlehem: Christ's name is never mentioned, and the actual fact of the Incarnation is described only from the perspective of God and in the most symbolic of terms, as a bestowing of God's "treasure." The envoi to the dévot to reciprocate God's love by mystical adoration is the only time that the poet describes an action originating from a source other than God.

Alabaster's sonnets were private works, and, except for one (#56),

were never published in his lifetime. One can surmise that they did not exert a direct influence on the 17th century devotional poets dealing with the theme. Yet they are important especially because they are not really a part of the great emergence of devotional literature in the next century: they are eclectic works which reveal many interesting features of Elizabethan devotional poetry. Primarily, they are evidence of a latent creative energy existing in the rather undeveloped tradition of religious poetry in that era. One can see, too, the gradual mingling of traditional church symbols with literary and philosophical themes from contemporary Elizabethan lyric poetry.

It is interesting to regard Alabaster not only as an early "Metaphysical" as does Professor Gardner, but also as an innovator in Elizabethan lyric poetry. His pedantic, yet well-made verses may not possess the grace and vision of Sidney's and Spenser's works. However, in the framework of the still rudimentary Elizabethan religious lyric verse, Alabaster's sonnets are unusually masterful and learned works. Alabaster is one of a handful of Elizabethan poets attempting to widen the thematic dimensions of the popular lyric form, the sonnet, by using it as a vehicle for serious religious doctrine and for strong personal devotional feeling. And in this task, except for his contemporary Fulke Greville in the sonnet-sequence Caelica, Alabaster's sonnets achieve far more artistically than do the works of the other religious sonneteers, such as Barnaby Googe, Henry Lok and Henry Constable.

The Nativity poems of these last but most significant poets of the 16th century constitute a bridge to the remarkably learned, rhetorically sophisticated 17th century Nativity poems. In "New Heaven, New Warre," Robert Southwell prefigures the heroic variety of Nativity verse, like Milton's

"Nativity Ode," which depicts a victorious warlike infant Christ. Alabaster, too, is a precursor in his own right of the expressive, argumentative religious lyrics of Donne, Herbert and Vaughan, all of whom touch upon an abstract, virtually unknowable Christ who is more accessible through symbols or objects in nature than as a real child in the Bethlehem crib.

Notes to Chapter Two-- The Sixteenth Century

1

Harry Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Church Fathers (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), pp. 155-156.

2

In addition to Virgil's Sixth Eclogue, there were other popular legends usually of classical origin associated with Christ's birth: the return of Astraea, the debate of the four daughters of God, classical deities like Apollo or Pan identified with Christ. See Giles Fletcher's Christ's Victorie and Triumph in Heaven and Earth, Over and After Death (Cambridge, 1632) which contains most of the Renaissance classical Nativity legends. See also C. Patrides, "Cessation of Oracles: The History of a Legend", MLR, LX (1965), 500-507, for a study of the cosmic peace brought on by Christ's birth.

3

Gustaf Aulen, Christus Victor (New York, 1969), 1st publ. 1939, pp.101-122.

4

See R.L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, nos. 70,80.

5

See the O.E.D.'s tracing of the term "lyric" to Sidney's notion of the "well-accorded voice" of the Renaissance lyric poet (Defence of Poesy, 1595) whose song offers praise, inspiration and strong feeling.

6

Selections from the Poems of William Dunbar, ed. Hugh Macdiarmid (Edinburgh, 1952), pp. 7-8.

7

Tom Scott, Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 282.

8

Compare the similarities in tone and objective narrative style of Dunbar's poem and Ambrose's following Christmas hymn:

Intende, qui regis Israel,
super Cherubim qui sedes,
appare Ephrem coram, excite
potentiam tuam et veni.

Veni, redemptor gentium,
ostende partum virginis;
miretur omne saeculum,
talis decet partus Deum.

Non ex virili semine
sed mystice spiramine
verbum Dei factum est caro,
fructusque ventris floruit...

St. Ambrose, "Hymn for Christmas Day", The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse, ed. Raby, no. 12.

9

The Early English Carols, ed. Richard Greene (Oxford, 1932),
nos. 295, 300, 301 (cited below).

Dulciter pangamus,
"Te deum laudamus."

The Sonne of God hath take nature
Of mylde Mary, that virgyn pure,
To saue mankynde, (thus seith Scripture)
Te deum laudamus.

When he was born, thatte Lord and King,
Owte of thraldome mankynde to bring,
With on accorde angelles didde sing,
Te Deum laudamus.

O Lorde most dere, that hast no pere
With the sweete quere of apostlys dere,
Bothe farre and nere with joyfulle chere
Te deum laudamus.

The potentates universall
In thi highe court imperiall
Geuyth the nonowre perpetuall:
Te deum laudamus.

Cherubyn and seraphin with loue ardent
Euermore crie with on assent,
O Lorde of Vertu omnipotent,
Te deum laudamus.

O endles God in persons thre,
Thi prophetes alle in ther degre,
Laude and nonowre they geue to the:
Te deum laudamus.

O heuenly Prince most glorious,
The triumphe wonne laborious,
Thi martirs sing victorious,
Te deum laudamus.

With confessours, virgyns alsoo,
With heremites and many moo,
For thou hast brought us owte of woo,
Te deum laudamus.

10

R. Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, pp. 350 ff.

11

Up until the rediscovery of the actual sites of Christ's life in the 5th century, the official church did not condone the popular devotion to the person of Christ. Only Origen, Gregory of Nazanzianus and of Nyssa proposed more personal attitudes to the birth. The Latin Fathers were

especially strong in maintaining the divinity of the child against his humanity, notably in the writings of Marcion and in the 5th century Nestorian heresy. For the most complete history of the Nativity theme in religious thought, see "L'Enfance de Jesus", Dictionnaire de Spiritualité (Paris, 1960), IV, pp. 651 ff.

12

Paul O. Kristeller cites the revival of Prudentius and Lantantius, both of whom wrote poems celebrating the birth. Renaissance Thought: the Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains (New York, 1961), p. 81.

Erasmus, Colet and Vives were also known to have encouraged their pupils to study Prudentius. See F. Gillman, The Evolution of the Christian Hymn (London, 1927), ch.3. and Foster Watson, The English Grammar Schools to 1660 (Cambridge, 1908).

13

A. Cook, "Notes on Milton's 'Nativity Ode'", Repr. Transactions of the Conn. Academy of Arts and Sciences, IV (1909), 307-388.

14

Robert Ellrödt, Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser (Geneva, 1960), pp. 190 ff; 166 n.; 178 n.

15

J. B. Broadbent notes that the resurgence of spring, a theme omitted by Milton in his "Ode" is a traditional motif in the carols, such as "Sprung is the perfect May"; see "The Nativity Ode", The Living Milton, ed. F. Kermodé (New York, 1960), pp. 12-32. Broadbent, however, fails to note that spring motifs were generally yoked with Marian Annunciation carols influenced by the French chanson de geste such as "Nou skringketh rose and lylie flour" (Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, no. XLVIII) and were not a medieval Nativity motif in the carols themselves until Dunbar.

16

For the history of the Christian notion of uncreated holy light and created light from St. Augustine to the Renaissance, see J. Mazzeo, Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante's Comedy (Ithaca, N.Y., 1960), pp. 60, 220-221 (medieval view); Merritt Hughes, Ten Perspectives on Milton (New Haven, 1965), pp. 88 ff. (Renaissance view).

17

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, "Hymnus 8. Kalendar Ianuarias", The Poems of Prudentius, tr. Sr. M. Clement Eagen, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, 1962), vol. 43, no. 11.

18

Ibid., ll. 19-116.

19

The "triumphal note" can possibly be traced to tonal resemblances between Dunbar's poem and 15th century vernacular poems on the Virgin's 5th Joy, her Ascension, as R. Woolf suggests in The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, pp. 307-308. Another possibility, to my mind, is that Dunbar may have been drawing upon

the idealized, glorious Christ of the Descent to Hell, a widely popular medieval theme which Dunbar had used in another liturgical poem, "Dun is the Battell on the Dragon Blak".

20

Scott, Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems, p. 280.

21

Aulen, Christus Victor, pp. 98-116.

22

Much of Erasmus' fondness for the historic Christ can be traced to the Brethren's manual for devotion, the late 15th century Imitatio Christi. Helen White notes that it was one of the two medieval manuals of devotion popular among Catholics and Protestants throughout the Renaissance. English Devotional Literature 1600-1640, U. of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature (Madison, Wis., 1931), vol. 29, pp. 194-197.

23

Erasmus asserted that he could not bear the willing "pain" of Christ. See Roland Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom (New York, 1969), pp. 59 ff.

24

Eugene Rice claims that the poem is evidence of Erasmus' growing secularism in that he reduces the birth to a "utilitarian" moral virtue. "Erasmus and the Religious Tradition", JHI, XI, no. 4 (1950), 165-169.

25

Desiderius Erasmus, "De casa natalitia Jesu et paupere puerperio dive virginis carmen" (1496), Poemata: The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus, ed. Cornelius Reedjik (Leiden, 1956), pp. 224-226.

26

For the Byzantine Christ-Helios and Hermes Triomphoros, see M. Gough, The Origins of Christian Art (New York, 1973), pp. 82-92.

27

St. Augustine, "In natale domini", Sermo CXC, vii, Patrologia Latina, ed. J.P. Migne (1841-1942), vol. 38, 1008.

28

Compare Erasmus' notion of the active intrusion of God's flaming essence into the world via the Son's mouth with the Neoplatonic emanations of the deity in Origen's notion of divine, fiery "seeds" or pneumatikoi (See "Commentary on Matthew 1:18"). See also Renaissance plastic and fine art which depicted the divinity of Christ through haloes emanating from the physically babyish son. A. Horton, The Child Jesus, pp. 84, 86.

29

For an examination of the Christian symbol of the bees, see George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art (New York, 1966), p. 12.

30

In his translation of the New Testament, Erasmus changed the Vulgate Verbum to Sermo to denote the Greek and Patristic notion of the Logos. See R. Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom, p. 140.

31

Concio de pueri Jesu, cited in translation in Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom, p. 102.

32

For the fullest treatment of Erasmus' practical, intellectual faith, bereft of superstition and practiced in the Christian's imitation of Christ's life, see the remedies for human vices in Enchiridion Militia Christiani (1503), in the Essential Erasmus, ed. and tr. John Dolan (New York, 1964), pp. 65-67; 88-90. For the term renascentia, see Johan Huizinga, Erasmus and the Age of Reformation (New York, 1957), pp. 112 ff.

33

In particular, Renaissance humanists translated the important writings of Gregory of Nazanzianus and Gregory of Nyssa, both of whom emphasized the marvelous character of the infant and his birth. See P. O. Kristeller, Renaissance Thought, pp. 80-83. Moreover, Latin poets like Prudentius who were considered classics in the Middle Ages were placed in their original historic contexts and thus came to be read not as Christian apologists but as literary works seen in the fresh new light of their pagan backgrounds. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualite, part I. Nativity legends translated from the Apocrypha were revived in the Renaissance and translated into both French and English. The popular English version was by Thomas Fortescue, The Foreste, Book III, ch. 16 (1571).

34

Helen White notes that although devotional works on Christ's life were popular on the continent during the 17th century, English Calvinists avoided them at least publically and transferred Jesus' suffering to mankind. A loose translation of Bernard's meditation on the Cross did circulate underground in England, however. See English Devotional Literature: 1600-1640, pp. 74 ff.

35

A Book of Lullabies, ed. F.E. Budd (London, 1930), pp. 9-12.

36

H. Walpole, "The Song of Mary the Mother of Christ"; Select Poetry, Chiefly Devotional, of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, ed. Edward Farr (Cambridge, 1845), pp. 422-432.

37

Luther composed a Nativity drama (Von Himmel Hoch) and a Nativity poem for his children Hans and Lenchen which is cited in translation in Bainton's Here I Stand (Nashville, 1950), pp. 237; 170-172.

38

For a description of the use of Christ in polemical tracts and cartoons put out by Luther's followers in which Christ overthrows the papacy and devil, see Bainton, Here I Stand, pp. 241-243. For Luther's use of John and the Pauline Epistles, see pp. 261 ff.

39

Martin Luther, "Commentary on Galatians", from Martin Luther, ed. John Dillenberger (New York, 1961), pp. 135-136.

40

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. J.T. McNeill (Philadelphia, 1960), II, 13.4.

For a full discussion of Calvin's Christology, see François Wendel, Calvin: The Origin and Development of his Religious Thought (New York, 1950), pp. 222-226.

41

For an account of the general climate of religious thought at the end of the 16th century and the prevailing notion of man's perversion of the ethical norms embodied in Christ, see Charles Cremins, "The Reception of Calvinist Thought in England", Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, vol. 31 (1966), 103-127.

42

For a good account of the broadsides and pamphlets on Christmas during the Interrègnum, see Walter Schmauch, Christmas Literature through the Centuries, ch. 2 and 4. Also, see Hyder E. Rollins, Cavalier and Puritan Ballads and Broad-sides (Cambridge, Mass., 1923), no. 47.

43

Edith Rickert lists 4 main 16th century carol anthologies: Wynkyn de Worde's New Christmas Carols surviving in only 2 leaves (1521); Richard Kele's collection (1546); Wedderburn's Compendious Book of Godly Songs and Ballads (1567); William Byrds Songs and Sonets (1589). Other individual pieces by court musicians John Dunstable, Richard Smart, John Truelove, William Cornish and Henry VII and VIII existed in manuscript form and were not printed until the 19th century. See Ancient Christmas Carols, ed. E. Rickert, (New York, 1966), xix-xx.

44

For the fullest biography of Southwell, see Christopher Devlin, The Life of Robert Southwell, Poet and Martyr (London, 1956).

45

A sketchy but accurate biographical account of Alabaster is given in the introduction to The Sonnets of William Alabaster, ed. G.M. Story and Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1959), Oxford English Monographs, no. 7.

46

See Pierre Janelle, Robert Southwell, the Writer: A Study in Religious Inspiration (New York, 1935), p. 110; Louis Mertz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven, 1966), 1st publ. 1954, pp. 10, 83, 146.

47

See Devlin, The Life of Robert Southwell, pp. 185-186, for the biographical background of the Nativity poems and Southwell's detached didacticism.

48

Janelle, Robert Southwell the Writer, p. 166.

49

Robert Southwell, "At Home in Heaven", The Poems of Robert Southwell, S.J., ed. James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown (Oxford, 1967), no. 42.

50

Nativity meditation by Gaspar Douarte quoted in A.C. Southern, Elizabethan Recusant Prose, 1559-1582 (London, 1950), pp. 217-218.

51

Southwell, "New Prince, New Pompe", Poems, ed. McDonald and Brown, no. 11.

52

Southwell, "The Nativitie of Christ", Poems, ed. McDonald and Brown, no. 6.

53

Southwell, "A Child, my Choyce", Poems, ed. McDonald and Brown, no. 13.

54

The three poems were published in the 1595 edition of St. Peter's Complaint. Yet Grosart prints them with the rosary meditations in Meonias because of their similar Gospel subject matter, see The Complete Poems of Robert Southwell, ed. A.B. Grosart (London, 1892).

L. Martz supports Grosart's claim, arguing that the 3 were meditations inadvertently plucked out of order by another hand than Southwell's. See The Poetry of Meditation, pp. 103-105.

55

For a good comparison of the emotional, naturalistic medieval meditative method with the intellectual, idealistic Ignatian meditation, see R. Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, pp. 9-11; see also Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, pp. 73; 80.

56

See Loyola's careful instructions on how to begin a "sensible" Nativity meditation: he counsels the dévot to visualize Mary's home in Nazareth, then to impose himself into the cradle scene to gain "an inward sense of touch, must handle, must warmly kiss the clothes, the surrounding objects, the footprints and other things joined to such persons." Cited in Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, pp. 88 ff.

57

George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art, p. 49.

58

Luis de la Fuente, Meditations upon the Mysteries of our Holie Faith, with the Practice of Mental Prayer, tr. J. Heigham (St. Omer, 1619), vol. II, pp. 25-26.

59

For Jesus in an aureole or "mandorla", see F. Souchal, The Art of the Early Middle Ages (New York, 1968), p. 13; see also M. Gough, The Origins of Christian Art, fig. 78; for Jesus as a burning star, see R. Bainton, Behold the Christ (New York, 1974), fig. 54.

60

Southwell, "The Burning Babe", Poems, ed. McDonald and Brown, no. 17.

61

Isaiah 9:5-8.

62

Southwell, "New Prince, New Pompe", Poems, ed. McDonald and Brown, no. 11. In phrasing, the above poem has some similarities with a Bernardine fragment of the 13th century, although Southwell develops the regal figure of the babe more extensively. See E.L. of the 13th C., ed. Brown, p. 192.

63

The Metaphysical Poets, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1961), p. 37; The Poems of Robert Southwell, ed. McDonald and Brown, pp. xciv, 124. See also The Meditative Poem, ed. L. Martz (Garden City, 1963), pp. 524-525.

64

Southwell, "New Heaven, New Warre", Poems, ed. McDonald and Brown, no. 16.

65

William Dunbar's "Now gladdeth every living creature" also combines both themes under one title, although Dunbar's use of the militaristic theme is far less developed than Southwell's.

66

See Dunbar, Selections from the Poems of Dunbar, ed. MacDiarmid, pp. 7-10. Also Erasmus, Poemata, ed. Reedjik, pp. 190-196; 224-226.

67

See Erasmus, Poemata, note p. 190 for Reedjik's review of the poetic history of the Harrowing of Hell theme from medieval to Renaissance times.

68

R.L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, nos. 48, 63, 66; p. 265 for Anglo-Norman poem on Jesus the armed warrior on the cross.

69

R.L. of the 14th C., ed. Brown, no. 125.

70

See Janelle, Robert Southwell, the Writer, pp. 94-96 for a description of the military spirit of Loyola's Exercises, although he makes no connection between Jesuit martial spirit and "New Heaven, New Warre", a work which Janelle sees as "tender and Plain." (p. 168)

71

William Alabaster, The Sonnets of William Alabaster, ed. G.M. Story and Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1959), no. 74.

72

Philip Sidney, The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney, ed. William Ringler (Oxford, 1962), p. 163.

73

The theocentric, gratuitous, unequal nature of Pauline "love" variously defined as agape or caritas has been explored by the theologian Anders Nygren in Agape and Eros, tr. P.S. Watson (New York, 1969), 1st publ. 1939. Rosamond Tuve has applied the notion of Pauline caritas to the religious poems of Herbert in "George Herbert and Caritas", JWCI, vol. 22 (1954), 302-333.

74

Gardner, The Sonnets of William Alabaster, pp. xxix-xxx.

75

Ibid., pp. xxvi-xxvii.

76

See Ellrodt's study of the Renaissance idea of Christian Wisdom or the Logos in Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser, pp. 190 ff.

77

This sonnet is different from the others in that it doesn't contain a liturgical theme but a legalistic one taken from Anselm's sermon Cur Deus Homo. See M. Caroline Spaulding, "The Middle English Charters of Christ", Bryn Mawr Monographs, IV (1914), lviii-lxi.

78

R.L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, nos. 117-121.

79

Ibid., no. 120.

80

Alabaster, Sonnets, ed. Story and Gardner, no. 66.

81

R.L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, p. 330.

82

Alabaster, Sonnets, ed. Story and Gardner, no. 62.

83

The use of the paradox in the Renaissance appears to me to be a great expansion of the medieval liturgical paradox. Whereas the medieval liturgical paradox as used in the Nativity poems is restricted to traditional epithets for Virgin and child and used to denote the mystery of birth, the Renaissance paradox is a rhetorical device borrowed from classical authors and used for dialectical or epideictic purposes. Often the paradox governs the entire structure of the poem. Compare Rosalie Colie's examination of the Renaissance paradox in Paradoxica Epidemica (Princeton, 1966), pp. 5-11 with Sarah A. Weber's treatment in Theology and Poetry in the Middle English Lyric. See also R. Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, p. 11.

84

For a brief analysis of the Puritan metaphor of pilgrimage and its connection with the Puritan redemptive "epic", see William Haller, The Rise of Puritanism (New York, 1947), p. 25.

85

Alabaster, Sonnets, ed. Story and Gardner, no. 59.

86

Edmund Spenser, "An Hymne of Heavenly Love", The Complete Poetical Works of Spenser, ed. R.E. Neil Dodge (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), ll. 55-84.

Bolton may also be referring to the Psalmist's praise of God's ineffability in terms of a being "who coverest /himself/ with light as with a garment, who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain." Psalms 104:2.

87

Creation ex deo implicitly asserted the Neoplatonic, hierarchical universe created by mediating agencies like the Logos. See J.H. Adamson, "Milton and the Creation", JEGP, vol. 61 (1962), 756-778.

88

Edmund Bolton, "The Shepherd's Song", England's Helicon, (1600), facsimile edition (London, 1973), no. R 3.

89

Besides Sonnet 56 examined below, another possibly classically influenced poem may be Sonnet 37, a poem loosely translating the Ave Maris Stella of the Catholic liturgy and composed on the topic of the Virgin's Ascension. The poem seems to me to have some thematic links with the classical Nativity tradition in that the virginal morning star becomes indistinguishable from the Nativity star, and the incarnate son is apotheosized as light chasing the shades of darkness.

90

Maurice Kelley quotes Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, Lactantius and Tertullian, all of whom use the metaphors of sun's rays and fountain for describing the orthodox conception of Christ. See "Milton's Arianism Again Considered", HTR, 54 (1961), 195-205. For the back-

ground of the fountain image in medieval love poems and Apocryphal Annunciation legends, see P. Dronke, The Medieval Lyric, pp. 66 ff.

91

Richard Hooker, On the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity (London, 1632), Book V, pp. 304-305.

92

Alabaster, Sonnets, ed. Story and Gardner, no. 56.

Chapter Three

The Seventeenth Century

It remains for the poets of the century of religious wars and profound theological ferment in England to give us the most sublime, artistically complex and philosophical works on the Nativity theme in literary history. In these excellent 17th century Nativity poems, the traditional Catholic notion of the historic, incarnate Jesus which had predominated throughout the Middle Ages and the 16th century is gradually reshaped by the Protestant notion of the redemptive and judgmental Christ. Not only do these poems assert the continuing vitality of the Scriptural Nativity, they are also theological works embodying and articulating the particular religious position of each separate religious poet. In this chapter, I intend to account for the enormous richness and multiplicity of the theme in this era and to sketch in general fashion the various directions the theme takes in the hands of so many major English devotional poets.

In the 17th century, the Nativity ascends from the level of a minor poetic theme in medieval and Renaissance folk poetry or didactic religious verse into the forefront of English belles-lettres, a transformation which reflects the larger flowering of devotional poetry as a whole during this remarkable era. As the theme enters serious, learned and formal Renaissance literature, it is associated not only with traditional devotional poetic forms such as the religious carol, the hymn and the meditation, but with other neoclassical poetic forms like the ode, eclogue and epic,

which were generally used for secular topics of great worth.

What especially marks these new, literary Renaissance Nativity poems is the great freedom with which the Nativity theme is treated. It is often united with secular subjects or is coerced into the service of the individual poet's own system of religious thought. Early in the century, for example, the theme becomes a flexible, versatile symbol for natural renewal used on occasion in complimentary secular verse, as in Ben Jonson's witty praise of Queen Henrietta Maria at her lying-in ("An Epigram to the Queen," 1630). In John Milton's "Nativity Ode" (1629), the Gospel Nativity is re-shaped by the poet's Puritanism, and the poem becomes a testing ground for the poet's later, major work in the Puritan epic. Later in the century, the Nativity is used to symbolize new contemporary truths, as in Henry Vaughan's "Christ's Nativity" or "The Search" (1650), works which bemoan man's separation from the transcendental.

All the Nativity poems of this century appear to de-emphasize the suffering human infant of the Roman Catholic penitential tradition and focus instead on a more abstract Redeemer-Christ. Yet the poems themselves are not uniform in their depiction of the birth but differ widely in the degree to which the eucharistic Gospel tradition is incorporated into the portrait of the newborn Christ. I have divided the 17th century Nativity poems into two main groups based loosely on the closeness of the poems to the narrative Gospel treatment of the birth and to the notion of the Nativity as the deity's real descent in the crib at Bethlehem.¹ These categories will be the basis for my discussion of the poems in this chapter.

The larger groups of poems, occurring earlier in the century, are those which adhere to the general narrative outlines of the Gospel version of Christ's birth, which regard the infant in the creche as the primary

example of God's sacrificial love and which emphasize the dévot's intimate encounter with the real presence of Christ. Here, the penitential tradition of shivering, suffering infant is not so much rejected as reinterpreted in a more intellectual and idealistic light and softened by the Protestant notion of Christ as redemptive and risen hero.

Many of the details from the Gospels are used symbolically or as decorative images celebrating a largely idealized infant rather than re-vivifying a historical truth. Also, classical motifs denoting the grandeur of the child are added, and lyric forms like the sonnet, hymn and ode are greatly expanded to make the poems ornate, private lyrical pieces with little resemblances to previous Renaissance Nativity poems like the impersonal liturgical hymn of Dunbar or the narrative, penitential Rosary meditations of Southwell.

Generally, the object of these poems is praise of the Nativity as an example of God's mercy and a personal, sometimes mystical, communion with the Divine presence embodied in the Son. Herbert's, Herrick's and Crashaw's works occasionally achieve the emotive, erotic quality of the religious love-lyric of the Song of Songs, in their portrayal of the infant as Heavenly Spouse or as object of mystical adoration. Donne's "La Corona" and Jonson's "A Hymn on the Nativitie of My Saviour," on the other hand, contain the poet's communion with the deity within a disciplined form like the rosary meditation or plain-speaking homily.

The other, second group, which we will treat last in this chapter, contains by far the most compelling and unique Nativity poems in English poetry until this time. This group does not treat a wholly eucharistic or Gospel interpretation of the Nativity; Christ's birth is seen not as one moment in human history or as God's brief descent into the form of

one man, but in a much grander scope as an abstract cosmic performance involving all of the universe and encompassing the whole of human time.² Christ is a superhuman, remote, sometimes inaccessible figure, for it is his redemptive, divine aspect rather than his divine inhabitation of mortal form that is presented here.

It appears to me that the works of this second category dramatize a Nativity which is radically different from the more mystical poems of the former group. These latter poems view the Nativity more abstractly and moralistically as either an ethical parable of good triumphing over evil or of God's visible intervention or absence in the affairs of the world. To my mind, they are truly original works departing from the predominantly Anglo-Catholic, epideictic Nativity tradition of English verse in the hands of Donne, Herbert and Crashaw: what these latter works seem to embody is a particularly Protestant type of devotion, that is, an intense and private search for signs of the deity in the dévot's own soul, in the natural world or in human history. The poems shaped by what I hold to be essentially a "Protestant" devotion are far fewer than the Nativity love-lyrics of the first category with which our chapter will begin; yet they are by far the most interesting and complex works of the century. John Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" not only is the first to synthesize Scriptural Nativity doctrine with a Puritan mind-set, but brings the Renaissance tradition of Nativity verse in English literature to a remarkable culmination. His work documents the general Puritan themes of moral struggle and millenarianism. Henry Vaughan's Nativity and incarnational lyrics are more visionary, personal works than Milton's "Ode" and deal provocatively with themes of animism and pilgrimage, major motifs associated with the more mystical Dissenters with whom Vaughan shared many common beliefs.

I

Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Herrick

The first group of lyrical encomiae of the Gospel birth, which we will discuss in this section, cannot really be considered a homogenous grouping, for they run the gamut from Donne's intense, intricate "La Corona" to Herrick's playful "Ode on the Birth of our Saviour." The poems should be considered as separate, generally short lyrics united not by common origin, form or doctrinal viewpoint but by their similar lyric attitude of uncomplicated praise of Christ's birth as generally outlined in the Synoptic Gospels. These Renaissance epideictic poems follow in the general church tradition of poetic praise of the birth -- the angelic carols of the Middle Ages; the few Latin Nativity hymns directly or implicitly taking the viewpoint of the angelic host, like the Gloria or the narrative hymns of Philip the Chancellor; some of the "colloquy" sections of Renaissance prose meditations on the Nativity. All of these medieval or early Renaissance antecedents for these 17th century poems treat the Nativity through the poet's extended direct address and formal praise of the infant and constitute a literary development of the Passion-oriented, doctrinal tradition of Nativity folk verse and liturgical lyrics which had predominated up through the 16th century in England.³

What characterizes these 17th century encomiae, especially, is that they appear to share the characteristics of both lyric and didactic religious verse: they investigate and expound doctrine as well as elaborate on the effect of doctrine on the poet's own psyche. Very often, the poet shares the spotlight with Christ. The very heterogeneity of these poems appears to reflect their sometimes personal or occasional viewpoint and the fact that they embody an individual or creative impulse rather than a communal

response to the tenet of the birth. Usually, the historical event of the Nativity is filtered through the poet's memory and is perceived by the individual poet from a philosophical distance or from a very contemporary, social perspective.

Of the poems in this first group, Donne's "La Corona" (1607) and Herbert's "Christmas" (1633) are outwardly closest to traditional Roman Catholic devotional forms. In arrangement of material in terms of events from Christ's life, Donne appears to model his "corona" of linked sonnets on the continental devotion of Rosary meditations, a more schematic form than the Ignatian variety.⁴ Similarly, Herbert's poem has some structural resemblances to Jesuit meditation. Yet the two poems far exceed their traditional sources in developing an introspective insight into the accepted dogma of the birth. What especially marks these poems is their fictional, psychological dimension and argumentative, contemporary tone, features not generally present in the prose meditations on the Nativity, yet which may have developed from the meditation's emphasis on subjectivity. These argumentative, introverted features are identifiable with those described by Helen Gardner as quintessentially "Metaphysical" -- the sense of an immediate occasion in the life of the poet being dramatized, the "vivid imagining of a moment of experience or a situation out of which the need to argue or persuade or define arises."⁵ In Donne's case, this air of individual expostulation is all the more remarkable in that the work employs so much traditional imagery from the communal experience of the liturgy.

Only in basic outline does "La Corona" express a surprising resurfacing of medieval meditative devotion to Christ's life long after the vita Christi had ceased to hold much meaning for the English populace.⁶ Like most Rosary meditations on the Virgin and Christ, the poem is arranged

in topics denoting a chronological order of events in Christ's life. Yet each single sonnet is not a narration, as are the Rosary meditations, but a lyrical celebration of the poet's emotional response to each event. Rather than a narrative, each sonnet is organized around traditional liturgical metaphors for Christ -- the Scholastic notion of the omnipresent deity (2); the Virgin as temple or tiny vessel containing Christ (3); Christ as Verbum or Wisdom-principle (4); as eucharist (6); as the rising sun (7).

Donne also appears to be undermining the eucharistic principle fundamental to the Rosary meditations. Donne alters the scope of Christian history and devalues the sacrificial aspect of Christ by virtually ignoring the Passion and expanding the scenes of infancy and Resurrection.⁷ Indeed, the 5th and most "traditional" stanza, ostensibly on Christ's death but compressing Christ's ministry from youth to death within its bounds, is undeniably the weakest. The stanza lacks a metaphorical focus; it is artificial and stylized and lacking in the formulation of a coherent message. Christ's suffering is barely treated, nor does it achieve meaning by an emphasis on the person of Jesus himself. Rather, the Passion is dismissed as a historical necessity by acknowledging Jesus as an "immaculate" man "whose creature Fate is."

By miracles exceeding power of man,
 Hee faith in some, envie in some begat,
 For, what weake spirits admire, ambitious, hate;
 In both affections many to him ran,
 But oh! the worst are most, they will and can,
 Alas, and do, unto the immaculate,
 Whose creature fate is, new prescribe a Fate,
 Measuring selfe-lives infinity to a span,
 Nay to an inch. Loe, where condemned hee
 Beares his owne crosse, with paine, yet by and by
 When it beares him, he must bear more and die.
 Now thou art lifted up, draw mee to thee,
 And at thy death giving such liberall dole, 8
 Moyst with one drop of thy blood, my dry soule.

For all its use of traditional symbols and liturgical poetic forms, the poem, to my mind, is yet a series of private, seemingly spontaneous prayers, directed to a largely resurrected vision of Christ. The various orthodox attributes of Christ are so developed as to astound the poet, to provoke him to new emotional heights and to an awakening of love and rapport with the deity. The entire poem can be viewed in this manner not simply through its Scriptural topics, but as an autobiographical account of the very process by which the poet attains the intimacy with Christ. The poem appears to dramatize the workings of Donne's mind at the time of writing and shows how the "weaving" of the song enables him to rise above an initially abject mood to one of rapture.

One particular stanza which I feel successfully reveals the integration of dogma into the poet's psyche is stanza 3 on the Nativity. It offers an example of the poem's primary theme, Donne's self-urgings to reject momentarily his mortality and a sorrowful sense of his "owne just wrath" and to enter imaginatively into communion with the divine via an identification with Christ.

Immensitie cloystered in thy deare wombe,
 New leaves his wellbelov'd imprisonment,
 There he hath made himselfe to his intent
 Weake enough, now into our world to come;
 But Oh, for thee, for him hath th'Inne no roome?
 Yet lay him in this stall, and from the Orient,
 Starres, and wisemen will travell to prevent
 Th'effect of Herods jealous generall doome.
 Seest thou, my Soule, with thy faiths eyes, how he
 Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lye?
 Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,
 That would have need to be pittied by thee?
 Kisse him and with him into Egypt goe,
 With his kinde mother, who partakes thy woe.⁹

The private, psychological quality of the poem derives from its surreal¹⁰ descriptions and its argumentative persona. In this stanza, dogma is not unraveled or recounted; rather, it is made more familiar and

real to the poet's mind by his imaginary accompanying of the Virgin and Christ through a symbolic, compressed version of their trials on the night of the birth.

The central symbol of the Virgin as tabernacle or as tiny womb containing the huge birth is recapitulated in the other descriptions of objects in the world which cannot match Christ's grandeur. Yet, unlike the womb of Mary, these objects -- the rude inn, the too-small crib, even the enemy Herod -- are inhospitable, even menacing, and denote the vile, incomprehending features of a world untouched by Christ.

In addition to sketching a symbolic version of the Gospel Nativity, a major purpose of the stanza is to show the mental process by which the Nativity is made real to Donne's mind. The poet literally is the main character in the poem, entering into the fiction as the protagonist who addresses directly the characters in the Bethlehem scene and then debates with himself in the manner of medieval body-soul debates. Donne's mind moves swiftly from a re-living of the events of Christmas through the eyes of the Virgin to the examination of the event's effect on his emotions. He addresses his inner self in the third person as his "Soul" and allows his imagination to "see" the self-sacrificing love of Christ and to measure his own pitiable worth by Christ's love, visionary tasks which demand an intuitive rather than rational insight into doctrine. The experience of encountering the deity's presence is rendered by Donne's splintering of his ego into an "I" and a "thou" so that he can enter the poem as participant of the scene yet still remain emotionally removed from it as poet. "Kissing the babe" then becomes a metaphor for the momentary spiritual intimacy the poet feels with the deity, a mystical feeling generally accompanied by a detachment from the body and, in this poem, an artistic

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objectivity. The dramatic monologue form which in this stanza moves rapidly from an address of the Biblical Mary to the address of Donne's own soul is especially efficacious in showing the poet's internalization of the dogma yet rendering that process vivid and precise.

Donne, in this above stanza on the Nativity, keeps the memory of the Gospel incident close before him. Although he achieves an emotional rapport with God at the end of the stanza, it remains for the first and two final stanzas of "La Corona" for Gospel themes to be transcended and a full, passionate communion with the deity to be accomplished and sustained. Here in these stanzas is offered the actual private occasion for the poem -- the "weaving" of the poetic coronet,¹⁰ the undertaking of the artistic exercise and devotion to eliminate the persona's sense of mortality and sinfulness and a painful private "low devout melancholie."

Moyst with one drop of they blood, my dry soule
 Shall (though she now be in extreme degree
 Too stony hard, and yet too fleshly,) bee
 Freed by that drop, from being starv'd, hard, or foule,
 And life, by this death abled, shall controule
 Death, whom thy death slay; nor shall to mee
 Feare of first or last death, bring miserie,
 If in thy little booke my name thou enroule,
 Flesh in that long sleep is not putrified,
 But made that there, of which, and for which 'twas;
 Nor can by other meanes be glorified.
 May then sinnes sleep, and deaths sonne from me passe,
 That wak't from both, I againe risen may
 Salute the last, and everlasting day.¹¹

A poem which conveys an even stronger air of fictional autobiographical religious struggle than "La Corona" is Herbert's "Christmas,"¹² since it is couched, to my mind, in the form of Ignatian meditation, a form which directs and develops the private encounter of dévot with deity along complex intellectual lines. Following Loyola's instructions for a meditator on the Nativity to "touch...handle,...warmly kiss the clothes, the surrounding objects, the footprints and other things joined to such

persons,"¹³ Herbert appears to cast himself as a character in his own poem by entering imaginatively into the Bethlehem scene to search out tangible tokens of the newborn Christ. His portrayal of the persona as traveller brings to my recollection Donne's earlier crucifixion meditation, "Good Friday Riding Westward." As in Donne's Passion poem, Herbert offers here an occasional rationale for the poem by inventing a narrative situation in which the persona is literally journeying and encountering by accident the Bethlehem inn and crèche and singing the real infant's praise.

All after pleasures as I rid one day,
 My horse and I, both tir'd, bodie and minde,
 With full crie of affections, quite astry,
 I took up in the nest inne I could finde.
 There when I came, whom found I but my deare,
 My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief
 Of pleasures brought me to him, readie there
 To be all passengers most sweet relief?
 O Thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,
 Wrapt in nights mantle, stole into a manger;
 Since my dark soul and brutish is thy right,
 To Man of all beasts be not thou a stranger:
 Furnish & deck my soul, that thou mayest have
 A better lodging than a rack or grave.

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
 My God, no hymne for thee?
 My soul's a shepherd, too; a flock it feeds
 Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
 The pasture is they word: the streams, thy grace
 Enriching all the place.
 Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
 Out-sing the day-light houres.
 Then we will chide the sunne for letting night
 Take up his place and right:
 We sing one common Lord: wherefore he should
 Himself the candle hold.
 I will go searching, till I finde a sunne
 Shall stay, till we have done;
 A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,
 As frost-nipt sunnes look sadly.
 Then we will sing, and shine all our own day,
 And one another pay:
 His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,
 Till ev'n his beams sing, and my musick shine.¹⁴

The device of the meditation skillfully sets the personal, psycho-

logical tone of the poem: the reader becomes an eavesdropper on the poet's thoughts and a hidden witness of the poet's intense and shifting moods from abandonment and enervation to spiritual energy and rapture. Unlike another use of the Nativity travel-monologue in the medieval dream-vision carols where the traveler's intrusion into the Nativity scene permitted the poet to expand upon the impersonal, dogmatic outlines of the Gospel Nativity,¹⁵ here, Herbert appears to dramatize an individual point of view, a personal conversion from luxury to religious commitment.

The actual encounter with Christ is not described through the established portrait of the Nativity tableau familiar in Scripture and in church literature. Rather, the reader sees only one side of the scene, Herbert's expostulation to the newborn Christ. The narrative details are compressed and the dévot's conventional envoi to Christ expanded. Christ is stripped of his recognizable human traits and becomes a mysterious, ideate creature "wrapt in night's mantle, stole into a manger," a huge, slightly menacing deity of whom Herbert pleads for mercy. Rather than naturalistic details from the Gospels, Herbert employs traditional Christian symbols borrowed from the liturgy or legend to document his own spiritual conversion in the poem.¹⁶ Instead of Mary's womb or the rude crib, it is the poet's own soul which becomes the tabernacle enclosing or possessing the presence of Christ. Christ as "sunne" or Nativity star shines not on the crèche but directly into the poet's heart, and thus becomes a metaphor for the poet's religious illumination and poetic inspiration. The symbol of light whose source is God is reciprocated by the symbol of the poet as musical instrument: both symbols, music and light, denote, therefore, the Pauline concept of Caritas, Christian love inspired by God in man and returned by man to God, an idea which, as Rosamond Tuve suggests, permeates

Herbert's poems.¹⁷

The private, psychologically real level of the poem is enriched by its allegorical dimensions. Helen Vendler points out in her recent close analysis of the individual poems in The Temple that Herbert revised "Christmas" to strengthen the allegory in the poem. The work originally consisted of the opening sonnet alone, but Herbert later added a second stanza which, in Vendler's eyes, moves to a unique and skillfully drawn depiction of the universe in harmony. Herbert accomplishes his allegory by equating his own musical powers with that of the "sun"/Son. In the second part of the poem, Herbert assumes the status of "divine" musician and becomes himself a metaphor for the Incarnation, thus transcending the dualistic incarnational formula offered in the opening sonnet. Vendler makes the further assertion that the allegory of harmony is grounded upon the fiction of a pastoral singing contest, in which Herbert as musician outsings both shepherds and sun.¹⁸

To my mind, however, it is the allegory of pilgrimage which is central to this graceful, emblematic work. Herbert appears also to be including the reader into his fiction by skillfully forcing him to adopt the persona's point of view. What is depicted therefore is not only one man's journey and discovery of Christ in Bethlehem but everyman's journey away from sin into a discovery of religious conviction. Unlike Vendler, I find the first part of the poem intrinsic to the entire allegory: the poet's initial wandering from inn to inn, like Christian's aimless travels through Vanity Fair, Bypath Meadow and Doubting Castle in Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress, depicts the human soul's natural propensity toward error and concupiscence. It is almost accidentally that the human soul meets Christ, and only after having exhausted himself with the "grief of pleasure"

and coming close to despair, when the soul is most receptive to Christ. It is important that Herbert's allegorical persona does not initiate action but is drawn inescapably to the stable, just as Christ, the Lodestone, draws men to him. Herbert's allegory of pilgrimage appears to document the establishment of God's manifestation in human society, the Church, in depicting the human soul as "lodging" or tabernacle for the incarnate Christ.

The poem's final section, the poet's "colloquy" with God or Christ, marks a change in tone from petition to affirmation, from a "search" or intellectual appraisal of the Nativity to an identification with the resurrected Christ, and a reassurance of the deity's indwelling presence in the human soul. The dense, prosaic texture of the first part of the poem is transferred in the second section to a lyrical adaptation of the 23rd Psalm via the popular Renaissance poetic version by Sternhold and Hopkins.¹⁹ Here, Herbert imitates the Psalmist David in joining first the shepherds in praise of the "one common Lord," then breaking away into his own song of praise. In this poem, Herbert comes closer, in my estimation, than any other poet in this group of Nativity paens to the original Scriptural source of religious love lyric, the Psalms of David. In "Christmas," Herbert achieves successfully a Davidic "voice," one both personal and priestly,²⁰ literary and doctrinal, verifying a poetic truth, a psychological realism as well as communally accepted religious precepts through the borrowed language of Christian symbols, the most powerful of which is the intermingled music and light, denoting the reciprocal nature of Christian love.

Whereas Donne's "La Corona" and Herbert's "Christmas" are dialectical, intellectual works depicting the poet's private coming to terms with the dogma of the birth and the presence of Christ in the manger, Jonson's "Hymn on the Nativitie of my Saviour" (1616) and Herrick's "An Ode on the

Birth of my Saviour" (1648) are formal, public expressions of devotion to the infant. Yet all share in the literary artist's single intent to glorify a newborn Christ who is a magnificent and seductive presence in the crib.

Jonson's "Hymn" seems outwardly very traditional a piece. In its bare exposition of the doctrinal outlines of the birth -- the descriptions of the dramatis personae, the elucidation of the Nativity as the descent of the Word and the sacrificial aspect of the birth through Christ's obedience -- the poem often seems like a vernacular transcription of the lyrical hymns of Adam of St. Victor on the same abstract topic of the Incarnation.

I sing the birth, was borne to night,
The Author both of Life, and light,
The Angels so did sound it,
And like the ravish'd Shepherds said,
Who saw the light, and were afraid,
Yet search'd, and true they found it.

The Sonne of God, th'Eternall King,
That did us all salvation bring,
And freed the soule from danger;
Hee whom the whole world could not take,
The Word, which heaven, and earth did make;
Was now laid in a Manger.

The Father's wisdom will'd it so,
The Sonnes obedience knew no No,
Both wills were in one stature;
And as that wisdom had decreed,
The Word was now made Flesh indeed,
And tooke on him our Nature.

What comfort by him doe wee winne?
Who made himselfe the price of Sinne
To make us heires of glory?
To see this Babe, all innocence;
A Martyr borne in our defense;
Can man forget this Storie?²¹

Yet in the first line and last stanza of the poem, the direction of the poem is changed from exposition of dogma to the more moral, philosophical end of the Renaissance classical poet. The opening, "I sing the

birth, was borne tonight" gives an obvious hint of Virgil's beginning in the Aeneid and therefore sets the tone of elaborate, oratorical praise of the infant. The classical reference also indicates the glorified conception of the poet as visionary and musician, not in the religious, pastoral sense of David in the Psalms but in the more moralistic, civilized sense of Horace in his odes and epistles. Jonson, himself, in the guise of elevated Horatian public poet addresses the audience as "I" and appears to be shaping dogma to his own ethical, social end.²²

The final stanza asserts Jonson's pragmatic reformulation of the Nativity event into an ethical message worthy of the Horatian's poet's highest accord. Jonson is not satisfied with the orthodox Roman Catholic reiteration of the doctrinal significance of the birth in that "the Word was now made Flesh indeed." Jonson must further define that truth, this time in terms of the "comfort" or social use to which the event can be put. The Nativity is not simply an article of faith; Jonson asserts that the event is an exemplum or "story" teaching the comforting message of men's present glorification as "heires of glory." Even more than Erasmus in de casa natalitia Jesu, Jonson has de-mystified and tamed the doctrine of the birth, bringing it out of the area of ecclesiastical verse and mystery to the realm of utilitarian and social poetic truths.²³

Herrick's "Ode" is even more obviously Horatian than Jonson's "Hymn" in that it turns the formal poetic praise of the child and the setting into an idealized, regal pastoral scene. The poem contains no narrative progression as does Jonson's. Rather, random details of the Gospel Nativity are refashioned into a luminous, fantasy-like setting with no basis in Scripture. Even in the "homely manger," Christ is a pretty figure, dressed up as a lover at a bridal, with jewels and flowers.

In numbers, and but these few,
 I sing Thy birth, O Jesu!
 Thou pretty baby, born here
 With superabundant scorn here:
 Who for thy princely port here,
 Hadst for Thy place
 Of birth, a base
 Outstable for Thy court here.

Instead of neat enclosures
 Of interwoven osiers,
 Instead of fragrant posies
 Of daffodils and roses,
 Thy cradle, Kingly stranger,
 As gospel tells,
 Was nothing else
 But here a homely manger.

But we with silks not crewels,
 With sundry precious jewels,
 And lily-work will dress Thee;
 And as we dispossess Thee
 Of clouts, we'll make a chamber,
 Sweet babe, for Thee
 Of ivory,
 And plaster'd round with amber.

The Jews they did disdain Thee,
 But we will entertain Thee
 With glories to await here
 Upon Thy princely state here;
 And, more for love than pity,
 From year to year,
 We'll make Thee here
 A free-born of our city.²⁴

The elaborate, epithalamic descriptions of the child's luxurious dress and state is a means of praising the marvelous worth of the child. Herrick's use of the theme of decking or dressing the beloved is akin to that used by Edmund Spenser in his praise of the bride in "Epithalamion." Spenser's poem seems to me to derive in large part from the Christian love song contained in the Song of Songs: like the singer in the Biblical pastoral and like Spenser's amorous persona, the poet in Herrick's poem is cast as lover in an attitude of erotic devotion searching for the Heavenly Spouse. Herrick's Nativity poem also encounters another amorous poetic

tradition with Christian overtones: the work contains elaborate floral imagery which, to my mind, recalls the imagery of the lovely and primitive "Maiden in the mor lay," an enigmatic work which came later to be interpreted from within the Christian context of the Incarnation.²⁵

Yet Herrick's winsome praise of the newborn deity has, like Jonson's earlier hymn, a public end as well. The poem is rescued from triviality or lighthearted eroticism by the final stanza in which the worshippers of Christ are transformed from shepherd and retainers to contemporary men, attempting to bring Christ into their city as a free-born citizen and symbolically into easy familiarity with them. Herrick, here, like Jonson, discards the mystical, doctrinal aspect of the birth for a lyrical celebration of Pauline Caritas: he is not attempting to be sacrilegious, but is affirming in a refined, commendatory manner the same truth that Vaughan later states in a negative fashion in "Christ's Nativity:" that the true meaning of the Nativity is not wholly a mystical apprehension but an integration of the infant's ideal virtues into the dévot's life. The lessons Herrick sings of are not the virtues of humility and poverty suggested by the traditional pity for a martyred Christ, but the more ethical, social love of man for mankind.

It is in the Christmas poetry of Jonson and Herrick that the Nativity first begins to approach secular verse, in particular the graceful encomiae of public figures familiar in classical forms popular in that day like the Horatian ode. Jonson and Herrick are among the first English poets to use the Nativity as a parodic theme against which situations or people from contemporary society are politely measured and praised. Interestingly, I have discovered that Jonson's and Herrick's courtly, lyrics appear to parallel a relatively unnoticed trend in didactic, polemical religious

verse during this period. Under the Puritans, the use of the Nativity theme for secular ends, either in verse satire or invective appeared to accelerate from 1610 to 1650, giving rise to a small vein of anti-religious Christmas folk songs and Puritanical Christmas carols. These works, however, are folk poems in the irreverent tradition of the medieval and Renaissance Nativity ballads and are not devotional poems in the courtly poetic tradition as the lyrics of Herrick and Jonson.²⁶

In Jonson's "An Epigram to the Queen, then lying-in" (1630), however, we are yet in the realm of belles-lettres rather than polemic or folk song: here, the poet has used dogma, like the classical myths, as a useful frame of reference for polite vers de société. In Jonson's epigram, Annunciation and Nativity references are used to praise wittily the pregnancy of the Queen and to celebrate her and her expected off-spring as insurers of the safe continuance of peace in the realm.

Haile Mary, full of grace, it once was said,
 And by an Angell, to the bless'd Maid
 The Mother of our Lord: why may not I
 (Without prophanesse) yet a Poet, cry
 Haile Mary, full of honours, to my Queene,
 The Mother of our Prince? When was there seene
 (Except the joy that the first Mary brought,
 Whereby the safetie of Man-kind was wrought.)
 So generall a gladnesse to an Isle!
 To make the hearts of a whole Nation smile,
 As in this Prince? Let it be lawfull, so
 To compare small with great, as still we owe
 Glorie to God. Then, Haile to Mary! Spring
 Of so much safetie to the Realme, and King.²⁷

Jonson neatly excuses the possibility of offense by asserting that the comparison of small Prince with "great" Child is "lawfull" since England is above all a Christian nation and thereby, as the birth affirms, blessed by God. Jonson's easy comparison of secular to sacred is not the mystic's discovery of Godlike resemblances with Christ in his own person but a more social and literary adaptation of the Nativity doctrine in which

parallel real-life situations have been glimpsed in the Gospel story.

Similarly, two of Herrick's many Christmas poems enjoy the same quality of witty social compliment as Jonson's epigram to the Queen. Moreover, they also appear to mark the emergence of the "literary" or synthetic folk song or more clearly, courtly imitations of medieval carols now enjoyed in aristocratic drawing rooms and performed by professional musicians. Herrick's "Wassail," composed in the style of convivial medieval fertility carols like the "Boar's Head Carol," is included along with other Christmas folk songs, in his volume of secular verse, Hesperides (1648). It is an interesting interpretation of the pagan Yule song, for it adds to the old themes of wishing a seasonal blessing of health and fertility to an honored patron, the Horatian themes of praising a host by praising his larder and his grounds. Herrick, however, turns the Horatian Ode into a slight, occasional song, with none of the seriousness and dignity of the ode: he uses the technique of the singer's blessing on the host from the wassail tradition to condemn the moral quality of a tight-fisted host. The song of blessing quickly turns to one of merry ridicule exposing more the lighthearted air of the hedonist than the solemnity of a guest or religious ritualist.

Give way, give way, ye gates, and win
An easy blessing to your bin
And basket by our entering in.

May both with manchet stand replete;
Your larders too so hung with meat
That, though a thousand thousand eat,

Yet ere twelve moons shall whirl about
Their silvery spheres, thereis none may doubt
But more's sent in than was serv'd out.

Next may your dairies prosper so
As that your pans no ebb may know;
But if they do, the more to flow,

Like to a solemn sober stream,
Bank'd all with lilies and the cream
Of sweetest cowslips filling them.

Then may your plants be pressed with fruit,
Nor bee or hive you have be mute,
But sweetly sounding like a lute.

Next may your ducks and teeming hen
Both to the cock's tread say Amen,
And for their two eggs render ten.

Last may your harrows, shares and ploughs,
Your stacks, your stocks, your sweetest mows,
All prosper by your virgin vows.

Alas! we bless, but see none here
That brings us either ale or beer:
In a dry house all things are near.

Let's leave a longer time to wait,
When rust and cobwebs bind the gate
And all live here with needy Fate.

Where chimneys do forever weep
For want of warmth, and stomachs keep
With noise the servants' eyes from sleep.

It is in vain to sing or stay
Our free feet here; but we'll away:
Yet to the Lares this we'll say--

The time will come when you'll be sad
And reckon this for fortune had,
T'have lost the good ye may have had.²⁸

Herrick's other Horatian Nativity song, "A Christmas Caroll Sung as to the King" (1648) is an ornate, musical piece composed in collaboration with Henry Lawes and meant as a public compliment to Charles I. In spite of its title, the poem in theme and form is not a "caroll;"²⁹ rather, it owes more to the tradition of the religious love-lyric and Christian pastoral, as seen in Edmund Bolton's elaborate lyric from England's Helicon.³⁰ Herrick's song seems to concentrate less on the notion of the Nativity as God's humiliation into flesh and more on the Biblical event as pretty, pastoral spectacle of folly and music. Herrick uses decorative, artificial

images from nature to describe the effects of the birth: yet his main point is not to endow dogma with an artificial poetic rusticity but to use the contemporary language of aristocratic praise for a religious theme in order to give the theme a social message. Again, as in his "Ode," Herrick's aim is to make the Nativity a modern piece, yet for the particular purpose here of royal compliment. In this case, the poem makes the same point as does Jonson's epigram to Henrietta Maria: the newborn "King" has a human parallel and, in this poem, is a pun on Herrick's host King Charles, who, like Christ, stands presiding over the Christmas revelers.

(Chorus)

What sweeter musick can we bring,
 Than a Caroll, for to sing
 The Birth of this our heavenly King?
 Awake the Voice! Awake the String!
 Heart, Eare, and Eye, and every thing
 Awake! the while the active Finger
 Runs division with the Singer.

- 1 Dark and dull night, flie hence away,
 And give the honour to this Day,
 That sees December turn'd to May.
- 2 If we may ask the reason, say;
 The why, and wherefore all things here
 Seem like the Spring-time of the yeere?
- 3 Why do's the chilling Winters morne
 Smile, like a field beset with corne?
 Or smell, like to a Meade new-shorne,
 Thus, on a sudden? 4. Come and see
 The cause, why things thus fragrant be:
 'Tis He is borne, whose quickning Birth
 Gives life and luster, publicke mirth,
 To Heaven, and the under-Earth.

(Chorus)

We see Him come, and know him ours,
 Who, with His Sun-shine, and His showers,
 Turnes all the patient ground to flowers.

- 1 The Darling of the world is come,
 And fit it is, we finde a roome
 To welcome Him. 2. The nobler part
 Of all the house here, is the heart.

(Chorus)

Which we will give Him; and bequeath
 This Hollie, and this Ivie Wreath,
 To do him honour; who's our King,
 And Lord of all this Revelling.³¹

The Nativity love-lyrics of Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Herrick offer some of the most graceful examples of religious lyric verse in English poetry. Their very substantial achievement suffers somewhat in comparison to the more heroic, ambitious or idiosyncratic Nativity works of Crashaw, Milton and Vaughan. Yet the love-lyrics we have thus far discussed are extremely important works which integrate the Gospel, liturgical or meditative tradition or Nativity verse into the private perspective of the Renaissance lyric poet. In "La Corona" and "Christmas," especially, the devotional poet achieves both a lyric and a didactic purpose: the common, publically known truth of Christian doctrine is here so seamlessly woven into the persona's argument that it possesses the emotion and force of a psychological insight as well as the legitimacy of dogma.

Ironically, although the poems of Jonson, Donne and Herbert are accomplished literary works in the century, they yet mark the final, most imitative and stylized phase of English vernacular Nativity verse. These Nativity lyrics which had arisen out of the medieval carol and Renaissance religious lyric gradually died out towards the end of the century because of the strong Puritan distaste for the religious holiday and the difficulties which most Puritans had with the notion of the human, incarnate Jesus.

II

Richard Crashaw

Like the Nativity love-lyrics we have treated thus far, Richard Crashaw's "In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God, A Hymn Sung as by the Shepherds" (1646;1648; 1652)³² is an epideictic work which asserts rather than expounds religious doctrine. Although the poet is drawn in the guise of two shepherds to the site of the crèche, he is, like Donne and Herbert, purposely vague in his descriptions of the person of Jesus. Yet the hymn is far grander in scope and conception, more complex in form and allusiveness than the others of this type. Crashaw goes further than Donne or Herbert in re-investing the now attenuated Nativity symbols and images out of the Catholic liturgical tradition (the Virgin as tabernacle; the son as heavenly body) and the details from the Gospel Nativity records with a renewed sense of lushness and mystery. He achieves this by focusing not solely on the Bethlehem tableau itself but, as G. Williamson suggests, on the pastoral singers' contrasting perspectives on the event.³³ In this section, I will elaborate on Williamson's insight and show how the shepherds' antithetical points of view serve to create a sensuous, original fiction concerning the birth while only superficially endorsing the dogma of the Word-made-Flesh.

Crashaw is an anomaly among these 17th century devotional poets writing epideictic Nativity verse. Donne, Herbert, Jonson and Herrick exemplify a fairly uniform perspective on the Nativity, one sanctioned by the Scriptures and shaped by the Anglican church's temperate, philosophical view of the Incarnation. However, Crashaw, born into a celebrated Puritan family and a notorious Catholic convert and exile, offers the sole Nativity poem in the English Renaissance professing the devotion to the

infant Jesus and Mary popular among the mystics of the European Counter-Reformation. Yet Crashaw's poem does not embody a doctrinaire Renaissance Catholic position. Just as his religious zeal was an embarrassment for European Catholics (as Crashaw's mysterious death in Loreto suggests), the "Hymn" exhibits an ardor and sensuousness that is singular even among European "baroque" poets like Marino, whose works Crashaw attempted to emulate.

Because his hymn is eclectic, drawing from Gospel and Catholic liturgy, from Counter-Reformation heroic religious verse and shaped by his own idiosyncratic mysticism, the "Hymn" has proven difficult to categorize. J. B. Broadbent, in his thorough and acute study of Milton's "Nativity Ode" places Crashaw's poem in the tradition of the vernacular Christmas carol; Ruth Wallerstein, on the other hand, numbers Crashaw's work among the heroic Nativity poems of Mantuan and Sannazarro which also serve as antecedents to Milton's "Ode."³⁴ To my mind, the influence of continental Catholic heroic verse cannot be discounted. I feel that an important key in uncovering the generic background of the poem and to resolving the seemingly artificial method and eclectic, contradictory views of Christ in the work is the poem's use of the Renaissance Christian pastoral.

As we shall see in my following discussion, most critical work on the poem has tended to emphasize the Catholic dogma contained in it and to de-emphasize the pastoralism that envelops the doctrine. In my estimation, however, the "Hymn" lies squarely in the tradition of the Christian pastoral, an ancient form dating from early Christian times and revived with much success in the English Renaissance. Crashaw's "Hymn" is composed in a literary environment in which courtly Christian pastorals were fairly commonplace. The 16th century first introduced Christian themes into the

classical pastoral; the results were pious, heavy-handed adaptations of fanciful Elizabethan shepherd songs. By the beginning of the 17th century, however, the Nativity pastoral had developed into a popular, precious vein of lyric poetry which drew upon the rustic shepherd of late medieval or early 16th century carols like the "Joly Shepherd Wat."³⁵ The most famous of these 17th century works were composed by neo-Spenserians like Edmund Bolton and Francis Kinwelmarsh, whose lighthearted and ornate Nativity revels were designed to delight a courtly, aristocratic audience.

Yet, in my view, Crashaw's "Hymn" is not directly influenced by the playful English Christian pastorals of the Renaissance Spenserians, but is a product of the continental, Catholic pastoral tradition in which the Counter-Reformation mystical devotion to Virgin and child were embodied. To my mind, Crashaw's antecedents range far beyond the native English practitioners of the pastoral. The "Hymn" in style and in substance appears to touch directly the ornate, lengthy Nativity eclogues of Italian Renaissance poets like Mantuan in Parthenice Mariana. Perhaps, too, the "Hymn's" ultimate antecedents were not the classical Bion or Moschus but Christian pastorals of the early Christian church, such as Proba's cento on the Incarnation or Pomponius' eclogue "Tityrus;" I have found that these Nativity pastorals, from early Christian poets, to Mantuan, to Crashaw, share definite stylistic affinities: all combine rustic Gospel setting with a heroic, majestic and divine interpretation of the newborn Christ.³⁶

Although Crashaw's poem is fundamentally an epideictic Nativity lyric, which attempts, like Donne's and Herbert's Nativity poems, to praise and to adore the newborn Christ of the Gospels, it does not belong to the same popular, vernacular tradition of religious verse that the others do. Nor can Crashaw's hymn be considered in the same category of heroic, redemptive

Nativity verse as Milton's Nativity "Ode" although they may share the same continental models. Crashaw's classical Christology is hesitant and is set forth very cautiously in this poem: he never totally abandons the eucharistic reading of the Nativity as kenosis or as Christ's literal "emptying" of his divinity upon his descent into human form. The main "Miltonic" echoes of the infant's transcendent and redemptive power are contained in only one manifestation of Crashaw's key symbol of holy light, a symbol made familiar by Milton in his "Ode" and one favored by classically influenced Nativity poems, such as Dunbar's "Rorate." Specifically, Crashaw invests the newborn Christ with a miraculous and luminous vision: his remarkable eyes, compared to the rays of the rising sun, are seen to chase the shades of darkness away. Like Milton's victorious infant, the child's eyes evoke the larger universal doctrine of oeconomia salutis,³⁷ or the policy for redemptive history initiated by Christ's Nativity and affirmed by his atonement.

(Both Thyrsis and Tityrus)
 We saw thee in thy baulmy Nest,
 Young dawn of our aeternall Day!
 We saw Thine eyes break from their Easte
 And chase the trembling shades away.
 And we saw thee; and we blest the sight
 We saw thee by thine own sweet light.³⁸ (ll. 31-36)

One can compare Crashaw's use of the symbol with an earlier use of the detail in early 17th century religious epic on Christ's life to see how well Crashaw has used the symbol to embody the doctrine of the redemption. In Francis Quarles' epic "A Feast for Wormes" (1630), the image of Christ as the sun-God Titan with miraculous, light-filled eyes appeared as one feature in a long blazon of Christ's martial, heroic properties.

...More bright than mid-day Phoebus, are his Eyes,
 And whosoever sees his Visage, dyes.
 I sing the Praises of Great Judahs Lyon,
 The fragrant Flowre of Jesse, the Lambe of Sion,

Whose Head is whiter than the driven Snow,
 Whose Visage doth like Flames of Fire glow;
 His Loynes begirt with Golden Belt, his Eynes
 Like Titan, riding in his Souther, shine...³⁹

Crashaw, however, uses the symbol not simply for rhetorical embellishment, as does Quarles, but to convey the notion of the warlike Christos made familiar in the second half of Milton's "Nativity Ode" in the legend of Christ's subduing of pagan oracles. In Crashaw's hymn, Christ's luminous eyes as rising sun and conquerer of night contains both nascent and martial qualities, and, like the classical treatments of the Nativity in Fletcher's Christs Victorie and in Milton's "Ode", suggests that the suffering human aspect of the Catholic Christ was challenged by the kingly, glorious Redeemer-Christ of the Reformers.

Except for this crucial symbol, Crashaw's neo-classicism is never wholeheartedly endorsed; the hymn does not ignore all signs of Jesus' life on earth but insists on the two shepherds' presence at the historic event. Crashaw's tentative formulation of the redemptive Christos is never independent of the traditional, Roman Catholic understanding of Christ as historic reality present in the "cold, and not too cleanly manger."

Much scholarly emphasis has in fact been placed on Crashaw's conservative Catholicism or affection for the human Christ.⁴⁰ His three grand hymns composed for the major feast days surrounding Christmas, the Nativity, the Epiphany, the Circumcision, have been interpreted as evidence of the continuing poetic tradition of realistic vernacular treatments of the infancy narratives from the Gospels.⁴¹ When seen in the light of his other Christmas feast poems, it is not surprising that the Nativity hymn of Crashaw has usually been classified not with Milton's "Ode" but with Jonson's "Hymn," Herbert's "Christmas" and Herrick's "Ode" as a work dealing with the Nativity as historic event with conventional eucharistic

overtones.⁴²

Even though two seminal, complementary studies of the hymn by Kerby Neill and A. Williamson have shown that Crashaw's revisions in the 1648 and 1652 editions of his verse eventually led away from the realistic portraits of Mary and Christ,⁴³ it is apparent to me that the hymn achieved its final, idealistic notion of the birth by reshaping, not abandoning traditional, eucharistic materials. In particular, Crashaw's symbols become more private, less obviously traditional in the 1652 version. The conventional Passion symbol of the burning phoenix, for example, or a detail denoting Christ's physicality, like the child's embrace of the Virgin, are recast as symbols representing the abstract, divine essence in Mary's womb. One verse is added in 1648 in which Christ, as nesting Phoenix, creates his own resting place or "nest" in the Virgin's womb.

(Thyrsis)

Proud world, said I; cease your contest
And let the MIGHTY BABE alone.
The Phaenix builds the Phaenix's nest.
Love's architecture is his own.
The BABE whose birth embraves this morn.
Made his own bed e're he was born...⁴⁴

Another verse describing the sleeping babe is revised in the 1648 version to denote the reception of Christ directly onto Mary's bosom, as the most honored created resting place for the infant, far surpassing earth's and heaven's offerings to the infant.

(Tityrus)

No no. your King's not yet to seeke
Where to repose his Royall HEAD
See, see, how soon his new-bloom'd CHEEK
Twixt's mother's breasts is gone to bed.
Sweet choise, said we! no way but so
Not to ly cold, yet sleep in snow.⁴⁵

In the same light, as K. Neill notes, the one stanza purposely deleted by Crashaw in the 1652 version of the hymn is the most sensual of

the piece, describing the traditional scene of Mary nursing the Christ child, a familiar detail in Latin hymns and vernacular carols. To my mind, however, Crashaw omits the stanza because it conflicts with the aggrandized and abstract vision of Jesus affirmed throughout the poem by his additions and revision.

Shee sings thy Teares asleepe, and dips
Her kisses in thy weeping Eye,
She spreads the red Leaves of thy Lips,
That in their Buds yet blushing lye.
Shee 'gainst those Mother-Diamond tryes
The points of her young Eagles Eyes.⁴⁶

Crashaw's hymn thus achieves a unique re-ordering of Nativity materials in this century and succeeds in conveying two views of the birth, the neo-classical and redemptive version and the more traditional notion of the birth as realistic and penitential Gospel drama. The poem, therefore, is a peculiarly idiosyncratic piece, neither fully penitential and Catholic nor fully redemptive and Protestant.

Yet in spite of its rather hazy amalgamation of redemptive classical with penitential liturgical notions of the birth, the poem fully succeeds as a distinguished example of the pastoral, religious love-song. Crashaw never presumes to go beyond the elaborate praise of the infant to the offering of doctrine, the preaching of a moral or mystical communion with the deity. His ignoring of the homiletic, didactic function of the devotional poet writing on this theme, a function extensively developed in the carols, hymns and meditations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance has led some critics to doubt the authenticity of Crashaw's faith. Francis Thompson, for example, dubbed Crashaw a "secular genius" who lacked a full understanding of the moral lessons of the Nativity.⁴⁷

Yet the lack of religious vision or ethical insight is apparently by design: what Thompson accuses Crashaw of is simply here a product of

the poem's genre. Crashaw's concern is apparently that of a secular poet-shepherd, to praise the beauty of a heroic, historic personage using the conventional language of romantic praise in the pastoral. Rather than a miraculous vision or an allegorical warrior, the newborn Christ is turned into a seductive object of mystical adoration for whose affections heaven and earth vie.

The use of the pastoral, in particular the pastoral débat, is a particularly wise choice. The ornate rusticity of the scene increases the seductiveness of the infant. The singing match is also the perfect vehicle for conveying Crashaw's rather hazy, eclectic Christology. Even though he loved the idea of the Passion and was fascinated by the grieving Virgin, he could not write wholeheartedly about Christ's real suffering on the cross.⁴⁸ Similarly, Crashaw holds conflicting notions of the incarnate Christ as both person and idea. And as Williamson has suggested, the "rhetoric of contrarities"⁴⁹ behind the "flyting" of Thyrsis and Tityrus, reinforced by the added choruses in the 1652 version, which give resolution to their dialectic, voices the duality of Christ in the crib as both infant and risen hero.

It occurs to me that through the singers' contrasting points of view, Crashaw gives us in alternating stanzas both medieval Gospel narration with classical hero. Tityrus points out naturalistic details of the cradle scene -- the dark (ll. 17-18); the manger's poverty (ll. 39-40); the cold (ll. 52-56); the cradling of the child at Mary's breast (65-70). Thyrsis sings of the supernatural qualities of the child -- his taming of winter (ll. 24-30); his choosing and providing his own nesting and resting place in Mary's womb (ll. 44-50); the presentation of the angels' wings for the child's bed (ll. 58-63). Indeed, the principle of antithesis operates

throughout the poem, not only in the poem's main "subject" for song -- the contest between earth and heaven for a suitable resting place for Christ -- but also in the complex relationships of paired antithetical images. The natural sun is opposed by the supernatural light in the infant's eyes; the chill of winter by the child's miraculous introduction of spring; the seraphic warmth by the pure but frigid snow.

(Tityrus)

...Gloomy night embrac't the Place
Where the Noble Infant lay.
The BABE look't up and shew'd his Face;
In spite of Darknes, it was DAY.
It was THY day, SWEET! and did rise
Not from the EAST, but from thine EYES.

(Thyrsis)

WINTER chidde aloud; and sent
The angry North to wage his warres.
The North forgot his feirce intent;
And left perfumes in stead of scarres.
By those sweet eyes' persuasive powrs
Where he mean't frost, he scatter'd flowrs.

(Both)

We saw thee in they baulmy nest,
Young dawn of our aeternall DAY!
We saw thine eyes break from their EASTE
And chase the trembling shades away.
We saw thee; and we blest the sight
We saw thee by thine own sweet light.

(Tityrus)

Poor WORLD (said I) what wilt thou doe
To entertain this starry STRANGER?
Is this the best thou can'st bestow?
A cold, and not too cleanly manger?
Contend, ye powers of heav'n and earth.
To fitt a bed for his huge birthe.

(Thyrsis)

Proud world, said I: cease your contest
And let the MIGHTY BABE alone.
The Phaenix builds the Phaenix nest.
Love's architecture is his own.
The BABE whose birth embraves this morn.
Made his own bed e're he was born.

(Tityrus)

I saw the curl'd drops, soft and slow,
Come hovering o're the place's head;
Offring their whitest sheets of snow
To furnish the fair INFANT'S bed
Forbear, said I; be not too bold.
Your fleece is white But t's too cold.

(Thyrsis)

I saw the obsequious SERAPHIMS
Their rosy fleece of fire bestow.
For well they now can spare their wings
Since HEAVN itself lyes here below.
Well done, said I: but are your sure
Your down so warm, will passe for pure?... (ll. 16-63)

Contrarities are contained and resolved in the paradoxical features of the Virgin Mary and Christ. In a reference to the tabernacle symbol used by Donne in "La Corona," the Virgin as mother is the tiny finite "bed" for Christ's "huge birth;" her breasts give off rare Virgin milk, both maidenly warm and maternally cool and pure. Christ is recalled in his traditional representations as dying, nesting phoenix and in the strings of liturgical paradoxes near the close of the poem which are used not only for their traditional incarnational associations but as praiseworthy epithets for the mighty hero:

Aeternity shutt in a span.
Sommer in Winter. Day in Night.
Great little one! whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoopes heav'n to earth...(ll. 80-84)

More importantly, Christ is interchangeably Pastor et Agnus, Shepherd and Lamb, a favorite typological description by Crashaw of Christ which he had used previously in a Latin epigram on the Nativity that later became the model for this hymn.⁵⁰ As Shepherd and Lamb, Christ is both author and executor of human redemption and the agent of salvation as well as sacrificial beast. The shepherds themselves, as pious gift givers and visionary singers, are the obvious choice for proper worshippers of the pastoral figure of Christ.

The simple, though eloquent "low style" of the shepherds and the sensuous imagery common to the pastoral act to distance the Nativity from the intimate, naturalistic scene portrayed by Renaissance carol imitators like Ben Jonson in his "Ode." Like the more elaborate and decorative images contained in Herrick's Christmas poems, Crashaw's images, though frequently based on natural details traditionally associated with the Nativity, are not amplifications of the realistic setting but are new details based instead on the Nativity as an abstract idea -- as the self-sufficient power of the Verbum Infans.

A good example of how Crashaw idealizes the harsh December setting is in the description of snowflakes falling on the manger. Taken as a literal description from nature, the snowfall has a specificity that shows the poet's close observation of a natural phenomenon. The flakes fall slowly over the infant's head and seem almost to hover in mid-air, as swirling snowflakes do in nature, and cover the child in a "sheet" or snow-drift. Yet when the description is seen in the context of earth's and heaven's contest for a fitting birth place for the child, the image of the snowfall becomes one more private symbol evoking the inacceptability of earth's offerings for Christ. Like the lullaby carols, Crashaw's poem, too, makes the claim that the December setting is a frigid one. Yet Crashaw's snow is not an unhappy or unlovely thing because it is not real. The "curl'd drops" of snowflakes fall "soft and slow" with a static, surreal loveliness and are compared to something as comforting as a blanket. The poverty of earth's gifts to Christ does not presume their rejection or earth's indignity but is simply another technique used by Crashaw to praise the infant and set off his magnificence.

(Tityrus)
 I saw the curl'd drops, soft and slow,
 Come hovering o're the place's head;
 Offring their whitest sheets of snow
 To furnish the fair INFANT'S bed
 Forbear, said I; be not too bold.
 Your fleece is white But t'is too cold. (ll. 51-56)

The pretty descriptions from nature point out Crashaw's imaginative, idealized view of Christ. They also show that he is not only moved by Christ's real person but by his symbolic, magnificent presence in the Bethlehem crib and by his historic or official role in the redemptive process. It is the human saints like Mary Magdalene or St. Teresa of Avila and especially the grieving Mary for whom Crashaw reserves a true emotional rapport and identification.

The final sequence of choral stanzas of the hymn in which the shepherds bid the Christ child "wellcome" is a theatrical rather than a devotional scene and shows the poet's passive, almost objective adoration of the infant without achieving any semblance of a communion with the deity. The choral welcome is a good dramatic device, recalling the final scenes of the medieval Passion dramas. Like the medieval mystery play's concluding chorus, Crashaw's final stanza allows the entire Nativity tableau and dramatis personae to be reviewed. The chorus also resolves emotionally and intellectually the contending elements of the setting, of the dual essences of the child, and the different perspectives of the shepherds as well through the long strings of paradoxes, both traditional and original, synthesizing Christ's many contrasting aspects, from "dread lamb" to "soft King." Yet the device of the formal chorus allows the poet to withdraw emotionally from his poem's dramatic climax and to focus on his characters' religious ecstasies rather than to document his own.

Wellcome, all WONDERS in one sight!
 Aeternity shutt in a span.
 Sommer in Winter. Day in Night.
 Heaven in earth, and God in Man.
 Great little one! whose all-embracing birth
 Lifts earth to heaven, stoopes heav'n to earth.

WELLCOME. Though nor to gold nor silk
 To more than Caesar's birthright is;
 Two sister-seas of Virgin-Milk.
 With many a rarely-tempered kisse
 That breathes at once both MAID and MOTHER.
 Warmes in the one, cooles in the other.

WELLCOME, though not to those gay flyes.
 BGuilded ith' Beames of earthly kings;
 Slippery soules in smiling eyes;
 But to poor Shepherds, homespun things;
 Whose Wealth's their flock, whose witt, to be
 Well-read in their simplicity.
 Yet when young April's husband shows
 Shall blesse the fruitfull Maja's bed
 We'll bring the First-born of her flowrs
 To kisse thy FEET and crown thy HEAD.
 To thee, dread lamb! whose love must keep
 The shepherds, more then they the sheep.
 To THEE, meek Majesty! soft KING
 Of simple GRACES and sweet LOVES.
 Each of us his lamb will bring
 Each his pair of silver Doves;
 Till burnt at last in fire of Thy fair eyes,
 Our selves become our own best SACRIFICE. (ll. 79-108)

Crashaw's pastoral singing match is by far the most elaborate example of the epideictic Nativity love-lyric we have thus far treated. He shares with the other distinguished practitioner of the Nativity love-lyric, George Herbert, the same fidelity to the Gospel narratives and a similar ability to convey the dramatic immediacy of the Bethlehem setting. However, he goes further than Herbert in filtering out the naturalistic elements of the event and in ignoring the penitent's identification with Christ's suffering. Whereas Herbert models his poem "Christmas" on the plain style of the Psalmist David and attempts to imitate the restrained pastoral simplicity of the Biblical Psalms, Crashaw, on the other hand, appears to be closer to the other Scriptural exponent of the religious

love-song, the erotic and allegorical Song of Songs. Crashaw may not have been consciously following this Biblical prototype, but he did, however, imitate directly the continental Catholic poems on the newborn or crucified Christ, the grieving Virgin, Teresa or Magdalene, all of which follow the poetic tradition of the Song of Songs in focusing on the sensual attachment of the human soul to its object of devotion. Crashaw, in the poem's last lines, goes so far as to suggest a negative mysticism in describing the shepherds' absorption into the Godhead in making their offerings to Christ and thereby becoming consumed by an intense, erotic love.

Crashaw's poem, however, never succeeds in going beyond decorative texture to an individual confrontation with the mystery of the Nativity.⁵¹ The poem remains an essentially ornate, static, highly polished work, illustrative of the poet's idiosyncratic, "baroque" devotion to Virgin and Child, but it lacks considerable depth. In a sense, for all its virtuosity, the poem marks the beginning of the theme's "deliquescence" or loss of religious potency. In this poem, the Nativity has been turned into a series of sensuous and brilliant images and tableaux, yet without the tension or profundity of a religious mystery. It remained for Crashaw's contemporary, Henry Vaughan, to confront more directly the growing trend of the post-Cromwellian period: the loss of faith in inherited symbols, the new disaffection for a world no longer incarnate and sacramental, and the imposition of idealized human childhood in the place of Christ's once-miraculous Incarnation and birth.

The Nativity love-lyric of the 17th century has many gifted practitioners, and these poets offer in their treatment of the theme some of the most memorable examples of Renaissance devotional verse. Poetically, these poems are important literary efforts in the century and show the

devotional poet's transforming of inherited doctrine into works drawing from poetic forms and genres fashionable in that day, like the sonnet sequence, the Horatian ode, the pastoral singing match. Yet in spite of their importance poetically in documenting the theme's entry into belles-lettres, even the best of these Renaissance lyrics, Donne's "La Corona," Herbert's "Christmas" and Crashaw's "In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God" display in their use of the Nativity theme a rather limited doctrinal focus which contains the full exercise of the poet's imaginative powers. Except for stylistic affectations and ornate imagery, none goes beyond the literal boundaries of the Gospel narratives or the liturgy for new imaginative literary formulations of Christ's birth. Theologically, too, the poems are examples of a vestigial Biblical tradition, one which still showed the English church's clinging to an outmoded interpretation of the Gospel through penitential, liturgical attitudes.

III

John Milton

With the poem, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629) by John Milton, the brief period (1609-1650)⁵² in which Nativity verse enjoyed the status of belles-lettres in the Renaissance comes to an apex. The "Ode" is the greatest literary achievement of the poems in our study, for its obvious technical virtuosity, its prosodic skill and complex integration of symbols. More importantly, Milton succeeds in transcending the inherited Nativity dogmatic formulae out of the Gospels, by now so commonly understood as not to need elaboration, and, as J. E. Broadbent suggests, attempts to affirm a poetic, "Miltonic" truth -- the notion that along with the divine power inherent in the incarnate Christ, the poet's art and intellect have the transforming power of establishing concord in the world.⁵³ After Milton's supreme poetic achievement, and after Crashaw's subsequent and graceful, "Hymn," the literary Nativity works of this century taper off into the minor literary works of Herrick who fashions out of Nativity doctrine smooth and elegant vers-de-société and into the private and philosophical "Nativity" works of Henry Vaughan.

With the "Ode" we encounter a second category of Nativity verse, that dealing with an abstract redeemer-Christ and providential Protestant notion of history; in addition, another kind of Nativity verse, the Nativity epic, comes into prominence. New poetic fictions are borrowed from Latin and Renaissance heroic poetry on Christian themes, and current Puritan doctrines concerning Christ are attached to the event. The influx into English devotional verse of heroic motifs borrowed from classical devotional poets writing on the Nativity like Prudentius, reflects a new, rejuvenated stage of Protestant Biblical theology.⁵⁴ Erasmus' philosophical, apostolic

treatment of the Nativity which he had integrated with antique myths and which had forecast the Reformers' emphasis on the redemptive aspect of the Nativity has no direct descendant in Renaissance verse until Milton's "Nativity Ode." What the "Ode" reflects is the Puritan view of the Bible as the revealed word of God. Specifically, the Bible to most Puritans held a personal and a historical message: it confirmed the saga of spiritual warfare in each dévot's soul and forecast the victory of the forces of good over evil. It also foreordained the establishment of a spiritual utopia or a fulfillment of the millennia in human history. There appears to be a proliferation of sermons and prose treatises around the time of Milton's writing of the "Ode" up until the beginning of the Revolution, dealing with the Bible as the fulfillment of judgmental, apocalyptic history. In particular, the Books of Daniel and Revelation were cited as concrete proof for the fulfillment of eschatological history in this life, and the many popular Puritan works elucidating the Bible through the notion of the coming apocalypse appeared to captivate the most unenthusiastic of laymen by their careful descriptions of the triumph of the elect.⁵⁵

Milton, too, was profoundly influenced by the general Puritan attitude toward the Bible as both proof and prophecy of apocalyptic history. That much of Milton's zeal in proclaiming that "with no weapon but the scriptures he can batter down Nebuchadnezzar's image of prelacy"⁵⁶ was politically motivated is obvious. In The Reason of Church Government, Milton dramatizes the confrontation between Anglican and Puritan forms of government as a struggle between prelacy and the might of the Gospel, here described as the mighty Christ of Revelation, armed and riding on a white charger in a manner reminiscent of Christ riding to battle against Lucifer in Paradise Lost Book VI.

I add one thing more to those great ones that are so fond of prelaty: this is certain, that the gospel being the hidden might of Christ, as hath been heard, hath ever a victorious power joined with it, like him in the Revelation that went forth on the white horse with his bow and his crown, conquering and to conquer. If we let the angel of the gospel ride on his way, he does his proper business, conquering the high thoughts and the proud reasonings of the flesh, and brings them under to give obedience to Christ with the salvation of many souls.⁵⁷

As Milton's position on the Gospels shows, the Biblicism espoused by most Puritans did not include simply a literal reading of Scripture. Like most Puritans, Milton held that the Bible was without error: yet as his identification of the Christos Victor with the power of the Gospels as God's victorious Word shows, what Milton and other Puritans believed was present in the pages of the Bible was the truth of revelation rather than historical fact. Christ, therefore, was seen not as a real human being but as a remote, awesome, allegorical figure who, like the truth of revelation, held many meanings simultaneously.

In my examination of the "Ode," I will show how the Puritan reading of the Bible in terms of apocalyptic history gives Milton an uncommon and unorthodox perspective on the Nativity, a largely eucharistic and penitential poetic theme in devotional poetry until the 17th century. Thus, although the poem partakes of every poetic tradition in Nativity verse until Milton's time, the work is unique from all others in terms of its epic form, its Biblical or theological doctrine, and its emphasis on Christ the Redeemer rather than the babe in the manger. Yet his radicalism is cloaked behind a strong veneer of orthodoxy: no other Nativity poem of this era (even Crashaw's later hymn which shares the same heroic models as Milton's) offers quite the same smooth synthesis of classical Nativity allusions, traditional naturalistic details taken from the Gospels and apocryphal legends with the new Puritan millenarian formulation of the

birth as a foreshadowing of the Parousia.

For scholars who have attempted to fix the "Nativity Ode" into a particular historical tradition, the classical and heroic sources for many features in the poem are easily apparent.⁵⁸ Many of his main features, such as the symbols of music and light, the decay of idolatry, the Nativity as fulfillment of Virgil's 6th "messianic" eclogue are borrowed from Prudentius' hymns 8. Kalendar Ianuarias, Apotheosis and Epiphany via early 16th century Renaissance continental neo-Latin sources such as Sannazaro's De Partu Virginis, Mantuan's Parthenice Mariana and Tasso's Del Presipio di nostre Signore. Milton also had other English models to follow for the heroic treatment of legends popularly associated with the Nativity theme, among them Spenser's "An Hymne of Heavenly Love" for the treatment of Christ in battle, Beaumont's Psyche for the musical, animistic universe associated with the birth of Christ and especially Giles Fletcher's opening canto of Christs Victorie and Triumph (1610) for the legend of the descent of the four daughters of God, a legend linking the Nativity to the larger scheme of human redemption external to Christ's life on earth.⁵⁹

In view of Milton's European Renaissance antecedents which dealt also with the figure of Christ the King, his characterization of the victorious Christ in the "Nativity Ode" is not a new one, but one familiar from patristic times in the writings of apologists and theologians who have preferred to emphasize the divinity and saving power of Christ over and above his real person,⁶⁰ and whose works were read with renewed interest by the Reformers. Because of Milton's aggrandizement of Christ as epic hero and his use of legends and sensuous language which emphasize Christ's kingliness and heroism, the "Ode" seems generically closest to the heroic devotional poems on Christ's life popular on the continent and England as

cited above than to any other tradition. Yet Milton's "Ode" seems to be remarkably eclectic, and many cases have been made by scholars for various generic schema in addition to the heroic model into which the poem might fit -- the Horatian ode, the Pindaric Ode, the liturgical hymn.⁶¹ Despite such arguments, the "Ode" seems to be distinct from the kind of elaborate encomia associated with either hymnic, Horatian or pastoral praise of the birth, since except for a brief and cursory reference to the Bethlehem crèche scene, the poet generally avoids any references to Christ's real presence in the crib.

The "Nativity Ode" seems, then, to be a remarkable and rare exception in devotional verse in this century and in the whole of English poetry. Although the work partakes of many strands of classical and Christian heroic verse, it is not defined solely by tradition. Especially when compared with the epideictic works on the historic Jesus by Donne, Herbert and Crashaw, Milton's work seems indeed unorthodox, in that it uses many inherited symbols, legends and sub-themes regarding the Nativity, yet defies neat formal categories. Many Miltonists have underscored the orthodoxy of the poem and have placed the work easily into the larger body of doctrinal church verse on the Nativity. Yet their interpretations differ widely regarding the various religious antecedents of the work. Rosamond Tuve, for example, has examined meticulously the "Ode's" probable sources in early Christian and Renaissance heroic verse and has uncovered the inherited Catholic symbols contained in the poem. Arthur Baker, whose work in deciphering the logic and symbolic structure of the "Ode" remains unchallenged, points to the Protestant conversion experience as the encompassing foundation of the poem. C. A. Patrides cites a "kenotic" or Greek liturgical view of the incarnate Christ in the "Ode."⁶²

What I have found most useful in my evaluation of the "Ode" is J. B. Broadbent's theory that the poem is not fundamentally governed by the doctrine of Incarnation and Nativity. Rather, the work is a unique tour-de-force, embodying a poetic rather than a dogmatic unity. As Broadbent notes, Milton makes an encompassing statement about the mimetic role of the devotional poet who is seen in the Sidneyan sense as creator or "excellent artificer" imitating God. Christian tradition becomes placed, therefore, in the service of an artistic unity, in that Milton uses an elaborate "fugal scheme of references" drawn from the reader's knowledge of carols, legends and Christian symbols concerning the birth: yet in Broadbent's view, the "Nativity Ode" far surpasses its predecessors by dramatizing above all Milton's identification of the poet's craft with the Godhead inherent in the incarnate Christ. Like a magus, Broadbent asserts that the poet's "Holy Song" confirms a cosmic Peace within the framework of art, a peace which the ordinary dévot anticipates at the end of human time in the hands of the kingly and judgmental Christ.⁶³

In addition, in the light of the poem's unorthodoxy, it occurs to me that Milton's Puritanism is a paramount factor in the poem, especially since it would explain the eschatological quality of the work, which makes it so unusual when compared with its epideictic poetic models. What I hope to show is that Milton attempts a political and sectarian rather than doctrinal reading of the Nativity. To this end, I have found most useful Michael Fixler's argument that Milton is a "prophetic poet" and the "Ode" the best example of Milton's Puritan millennial vision of the history.⁶⁴

The "Nativity Ode", as we have seen, owes only part of its success to its tradition, in spite of the poem's exalted position at the end of a long history of classical treatments of the birth dating from Prudentius'

Hellenistic poem. Milton's "Ode" is above all a rare, personal vision of the birth, voicing a private commitment to the devotional poet's craft⁶⁵ and affirming Milton's faith in a few important, basic tenets of 17th century Puritanism.

The "Ode" can be seen not only as a rare, exceptional work but also as the artistic pinnacle of Renaissance Nativity verse because it recapitulates so well the techniques and themes of its Renaissance heroic predecessors through its syncretistic learning, its neo-Spenserian rhetoric, its skillful use of the traditional symbols of light and harmony and because it re-orders these features into a remarkably personal poetic statement of faith. When seen in the framework of Milton's entire oeuvre, the "Ode" emerges only as the finest product of his relatively immature genius. Perhaps the best way to regard it is not in comparison with Nativity poems of Milton's predecessors and contemporaries but with his other, greater work in the religious epic, Paradise Lost. The "Nativity Ode" then emerges, in C. A. Patrides' terms, as a "full dress rehearsal" for many of the doctrines in Paradise Lost concerning the various victorious attributes of the risen Christ.⁶⁶ To my mind, the most outstanding similarities between the two portraits of Christ would include: his judgmental aspect and his importance as the axis of redemptive, didactic history. All of these features show Milton's attempt to create a new mythology for the newborn Christ, one independent of the liturgical and penitential reading of the Gospels and more in line with the Puritan evangelical notion of seeing the Bible in terms of millenarianism or apocalyptic political history.⁶⁷

If we regard the "Ode" in terms of how Milton develops the persona of Christ within Arthur Barker's generally accepted three-part structure

of the poem,⁶⁸ we find that the poem breaks down thematically into a conventional epic narration of history -- first the presentation of the topic: the description of the contemporary Christmas setting from which point the poet writes; the flashback to the central action, the Nativity in Bethlehem; the leap forward to the future in the description of Christ's victory at the Last Judgment; and a final flashback to the event in the stable. Within this narrative structure in which events are seen as *mirror images* and consequences of each other, the definition of a Nativity not circumscribed by human time or the span of Christ's mortal life and lying outside of human history is effected.

Probably the most important and obvious feature in the first two parts of the poem describing the Christmas present and past is that Milton makes no attempt to re-create a facsimile of the Bethlehem Nativity. Instead of the real presence of Christ in the crib affirmed by what Milton terms the "carnal" sacraments of the Catholic church,⁶⁹ Milton celebrates an omnipresent, abstract deity, a God enthroned in the heavens who inspires faith, virtue as well as inspiration in the poet, as Milton describes in The Reason of Church Government. (1642)

Wisdom and virtue can only be obtained by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases.⁷⁰

To Milton, the Nativity is not a historic or realistic event, even though he makes slight references to the general features and characters associated with it from the Gospels. Rather, these details and personae are only used to sketch the event in the memory of the reader; Milton expects the reader's mind to supply the rest. He is not concerned with re-dramatizing the event; rather it is the abstract supra-historical meaning of the Nativity which is his real end -- the victorious and militant entry of Christ as

Logos into human history transforming it into a salvific process.⁷¹ The poet's point of view remains outside human time in the timeless, heavenly realm from which the Logos operates.

Except for a cursory nod to the chronological records of Christ's life and the liturgical tradition of linking the infant with full grown martyr, in Milton's allusion to the smiling babe's fate on the "bitter cross" (xlv), Christ is divested of his role as martyr and as a unity of matter and spirit and becomes an image of abstract perfection. He is shown especially to be veritably the same regal, incorporeal being before and after birth. Before his Incarnation into human form, he is cast in the image of uncreated light, a symbolic figure who sits enthroned in judgment with God over mankind. Even after Christ assumes the "darksome house of mortal clay," he is described indirectly through grand epithets denoting his magnificence and kingly function. Again, he is cast as a form of light, this time the created, natural light of a "greater Sun," and is referred to also as a monarch, a "mighty Pan," the mythic leader of Shepherds, the "Heir" of heaven. Similarly, Milton's references to the Virgin do not emphasize her naturalness as a real mother but rather her official, mediating role as agent for the Incarnation of Christ. Even the sole realistic detail at the end of the poem describing the Virgin lulling the child to sleep is only a decorative narrative detail inserted as a "set," expected motif suggesting the ending of the birthday and thus the ending of the poet's song.

But peacefull was the night
 Wherein the Prince of light
 His raigñ of peace upon the earth began:
 The Windes with wonder whist
 Smoothly the waters kist,
 Whispering new joyes to the milde Ocean,
 Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
 While Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

The Stars with deep amaze
 Stand fixt in stedfast gaze,
 Bending one way their pretious influence,
 And will not take their flight,
 For all the morning light,
 Or Lucifer that often warn'd them thence;
 But in their glimmering Orbs did glow,
 Untill their Lord himself bespake, and bid them go.

And though the shady gloom
 Had given day her room,
 The Sun himself with-held his wonted speed,
 And hid his head for shame,
 As his inferior flame,
 The new enlighten'd world no more should need;
 He saw a greater Sun appear
 Then his bright Throne, or burning Axletree could bear.

The Shepherds on the Lawn,
 Or ere the point of dawn,
 Sate simply chatting in a rustick row;
 Full little thought they than,
 That the mighty Pan
 Was kindly com to live with them below;
 Perhaps their loves, or els their sheep,
 Was all that did their silly thoughts so busie keep. (st. 5-8)⁷²

Milton describes in this first part of the "Nativity Ode" not the newborn infant but the incarnate divinity inherent in Christ, the symbol of revelation imparted in the Gospels, whose godliness infuses and transforms human shape into a regal, symbolic form. Similarly, in the description of Christ's Nativity in Paradise Lost, the newborn Christ is also described not through traditional liturgical paradoxes in which the duality of Christ is affirmed, but by an emphasis on his divinity and especially on his kingly, deterministic role in redemption. In the angelic carol preceding the Nativity in Book XII of Paradise Lost, no mention is made of the Bethlehem scene; rather, the angels sing of Christ in heaven. Adam addresses a paean to Mary not in her real person as tabernacle or hortus conclusus but as an immaterial functionary, the mediating agent through which the Incarnation and redemption is effected, and ends with a description of a Christ victorious over Satan.

His place of birth a Solemn Angel tells
 To simple Shepherds, keeping watch by night;
 They gladly thither haste, and by a Choir
 Of squadron'd Angels hear his Carol sung.
 A Virgin is his Mother, but his Sire
 The Power of the most High; he shall ascend
 The Throne hereditary, and bound his Reign
 With earth's wide bounds, his glory with the Heav'ns.
 He ceas'd, discerning Adam with such joy
 Surcharg'd, as had like grief been dew'd in tears,
 Without the vent of words, which these be breath'd.
 O Prophet of glad tidings, finisher
 Of utmost hope! Now clear I understand
 What oft my steadiest thoughts have searcht in vain,
 Why our great expectation should be call'd
 The seed of Woman: Virgin Mother, Hail,
 High in the love of Heav'n, yet from my Loins
 Thou shalt proceed, and from thy Womb the Son
 Of God most High: so God with man unites.
 Needs must the Serpent now his capital bruise
 Expect with mortal pain: say where and when
 Thir fight, what stroke shall bruise the Victor's heel. (P. L. XII,⁷³
 364-385)

From the above passages from the "Nativity Ode" and Paradise Lost, one can see how Milton's notion persisted of a Nativity preceding outside of historic time and giving birth to a visible but ideate notion of a risen, judgmental Christ. Both works show how traditional orthodox Gospel material was re-interpreted to reflect the Puritan tendency to revere not the New Testament accounts of Christ's birth and childhood but the Johannine and patristic accounts of his mystery and ineffability and the account about Christ's power in Revelation. Like Milton, most Puritans did not dismiss the Incarnation along with the festivities of Christmas, but merely re-interpreted it according to their more philosophical view of Christ.⁷⁴ For just as Christ's real presence in the sacrament of the eucharist was made into a metaphorical presence by Calvin, as was the descent of Christ into hell after the Passion, so was the "descent" of Christ into the womb of Mary by Puritans. A parallel may be drawn between accounts in the sermons of Puritan and Anglican preachers battling over the interpretation of

the Apostle's Creed and Christ's actual or symbolic death on the cross and the "heretical" interpretations of Christ's birth among the more radical evangelical sects like the Anabaptists or Family of Love. Many Puritan preachers refused to recognize Christ's real suffering and death and his real entry into hell.⁷⁵ Similarly, these sects refused to impute to Christ any taint of original sin and held that Christ took no flesh from his mother at the Incarnation and Nativity. One view argued that Christ at birth passed through the Virgin like saffron through a bag.⁷⁶

Milton's abstract, ineffable Christ seems to be particularly influenced by Calvin's notion of the Incarnation, a notion which Calvin developed gradually through successive versions of the Institutes and, it seems, concurrently with the tenet of predestination. Generally, Christ's role as Mediator in Calvin's thought is depicted not from the perspective of the Passion but more symbolically through Christ's willing humiliation into flesh at the moment of the Incarnation.⁷⁷ The displacement of Passion by Incarnation occurs perhaps because of Calvin's tendency to de-emphasize the humanity of Christ and to aggrandize instead his divinity. Calvin, nevertheless, was careful not to stray into overt Arianism; rather, he was meticulous in affirming the integrity of Christ's dual nature as well as the unity of his person.⁷⁸

Calvin's application of the traditional description of Christ, however, has usually been interpreted as his acknowledgement of Christ's divinity over his humanity.⁷⁹ Calvin conceives of the Incarnation as only a brief "incident in the Redemption," that is, an event seen in terms of a larger plan for all of humanity. God's plan, predestination, views the Incarnation as the necessary act by which reprobate man is given access to glorification. Yet rather than portraying Christ as a human hero acting as an

independent agent of God's will, whose decision to assume the frailty of manhood is his own, it is Calvin's God who gratuitously ordains and directs Christ's "willing" part in the scheme of salvation. Christ, therefore, in Calvin's thought, lacks a personality of his own and assumes the reflected glory and magnificence of God, just as do God's "elect" on earth.⁸⁰

Similarly, the spotless, fully divine hero-Christ of Milton's "Nativity Ode" is as remote and abstract as Calvin's official Mediator. In the first two sections of the poem, Christ is primarily a participant in God's glory, a deity enthroned in the heavens and an active, integral part of the "Tri-nal Unity" that constitutes the Godhead. By far, the most interesting development of Milton's ineffable, official Calvinistic Redeemer-Christ is shown in the final section of the "Nativity Ode" describing Christ as victorious hero at the Parousia. Rather than Christ's death, the central event of the Incarnation moves toward the risen, war-like Christ as Judge. Where previous poets, like Southwell, depicted a militaristic Christ drawn from traditional sources of the Christus Victor in the Crucifixion and Descent from the Cross, Milton draws primarily from Scriptural and patristic sources describing the risen, judgmental Christ in his pre-existent state as God's champion at the war in heaven and especially at the Resurrection as described in the popular Puritan apocalyptic vision in the Book of Revelation.⁸¹ And it is this "eschatological weight," this sense of an open-ended sacred history not circumscribed by the limits of Christ's life and progressing toward some ominous suprahistorical destiny, that gives the "Nativity Ode" its very original and unusual feeling.⁸²

In the final section, the "Ode" considers the incarnate Christ in action in universal history or the consequences of the Nativity in terms of man's redemption. All the major themes of the poem, particularly Christ's

powerful aspects as monarch of light and his ability to becalm nature are synthesized in Christ's dual roles as "dreadfull Judge" and as warrior. Both roles offer portraits drawn from Byzantine and patristic notions of the Pantokrater, a Byzantine icon who fused the Christian messianic ideal with older pagan nature deities.⁸³ Milton may have received these iconographical images of Christ via Prudentius' Nativity hymns and those of Renaissance imitators like Spenser in "An Hymne of Heavenly Love."

But wisest Fate sayes no,
 This must not yet be so,
 The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy,
 That on the bitter cross
 Must redeem our loss;
 So both himself and us to glorifie:
 Yet first to those ychain'd in sleep,
 The wakefull trump of doom must thunder through the deep.

With such a horrid clang
 As on mount Sinai rang
 While the red fire, and smouldring clouds out brake:
 The aged Earth agast
 With terrour of that blast,
 Shall from the surface to the center shake,
 When at the worlds last session,
 The dreadfull Judge in middle Air shall spread his throne.

And then at last our bliss
 Full and perfect is,
 But now begins, for from this happy day
 Th'old Dragon under ground
 In straiter limits bound,
 Not half so far casts his usurped sway,
 And wrath to see his Kingdom fail,
 Swindges the scaly Horrour of his fouled tail. (st. 16-18)

The suggestion of warfare in the poem is achieved by Milton's linking of Christ's roles as pre-existent warrior in heaven and as judge at the end of time directly with the personae of the Hercules and "mighty Pan." He expands the description of events taken from Revelation to correspond to the events in the Gospels surrounding the Nativity. The reference in Matthew 2:13-18 to the ancestress weeping for her lost "children" after Herod's massacre, widely interpreted in medieval plays as a scene of

lament by the Mothers of Bethlehem, is in Milton's "Ode" turned into the sounds of lamenting pagan deities fleeing from their natural haunts in terror of Christ. Thus, the "voice of weeping heard and loud lament" does not foreshadow Christ's death, as the deaths of the innocent child-victims of Herod were understood to do, but rather emphasizes Christ's power.

The lonely mountains o're,
 And the resounding shore,
 A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
 From haunting spring, and dale
 Edg'd with poplar pale,
 The parting Genius is with sighing sent,
 With flowre-inwov'n tresses torn
 The Nymphes in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn. (st. 20)

In fact, all the major conceptual symbols and abstract details by which Christ's power is conveyed in the poem -- his remarkable light, his Herculean infant strength, his aspect as judge -- are seen to contain concrete elements of physical strength by which, in the poem's final section, the foe are vanquished. Christ's swaddling bands, like the newborn Hercules strangling the snakes, bind "the damned crew;" the light from the remarkable "Sun" blinds the eyes of the pagan gods; his "dredded Infant's hand," like the "dredded Judge in middle Air" reaches out to grasp the sorcerers of Osiris.

He feels from Juda's Land
 The dredded Infants hand,
 The rayes of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn;
 Nor all the gods beside,
 Longer dare abide,
 Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:
 Our Babe to shew his Godhead true,
 Can in his swadling bands controul the damned crew. (st. 25)

Yet Milton's development of the martial and judgmental aspects of Christ are still relatively unformed when compared to his portraits of Christ in Paradise Lost. Even though the battle between the pagan deities

and Christ is the climax of the "Nativity Ode," Christ never actively generates action as warrior or judge. His power is a reflected one, prepared for in Part II by the uneasy calm of the night of his birth and effected by the fleeing deities whose roll call of exotic names evoke a vision of hurtling figures fleeing swiftly before the infant's approach. Christ's might is also measured indirectly by the persons who adore him so unquestioningly. In particular, he achieves definition by the angels who stand in squadrons armed "in order serviceable" ready to do his bidding, by the Nativity star who waits too for Christ's call and by the naive awe of the shepherds.

The strong implication of epic battle is purely a fiction in the poem. There is no real dramatic clash between opposing forces; even the grand unresolved paradoxes of light and dark, harmony and discord, are only apparent paradoxes which, unlike the liturgical paradox, do not propel the reader past faulty reason toward a deeper intuition of truth.⁸⁴ Even Milton's Christ, as the grandiose Verbum Infans of the Fathers becomes transposed from the traditional paradox of "silent infant Word" denoting Christ's duality and rendered instead as the dramatic detail of the angels' miraculous and silent song.

Milton shows us only one side of the battle, the final victorious ending after the clash between Christ and the pagan gods have taken place, just as he wishes to show a newborn Christ of pure abstract power, one who denotes the consequences of the Nativity in insuring man's redemption from error, rather than the process by which salvation is accomplished by man's or Christ's real suffering.

The splendid, judgmental Christ of the "Ode" is perhaps Milton's earliest, important formulation of the all-powerful, impassive Christian

hero, a character whom he was later to develop more extensively in Samson Agonistes, Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. The most direct outgrowth of the "Ode's" Christ is the portrait of the pre-existent Messiah who does battle with Lucifer's forces. It is obvious that some martial features from the "Ode," like the roll call of fleeing enemy gods, have been directly expanded in Paradise Lost's version of the rout of the fallen angels in Book II. In addition, Milton has in Book V turned Christ into an active, clearly defined character in that war. Whereas Christ in the "Ode" was referred to in terms of the abstract symbol of uncreated or natural light, here, Christ is identified with the sun's classical anthropomorphic counterpart, the god Phoebus, and is described as a deity in full battle regalia riding across the heavens in a flaming chariot. The armed Cherubim who stood silent and obedient next to the crib have also been transformed from passive bystanders to actors directly engaged in the poem's action. They ride with Christ in his chariot and are accompanied by characters personifying the Roman ideal of victory and dramatizing David's vision of the loyal angels amassed against Lucifer. Milton has also taken much of the setting of the battle in heaven directly from the "Nativity Ode's" description of the Last Judgment scene in Revelation. Yet the thunder, smoke and earthquake of the "Ode" have been telescoped more skillfully to convey Christ's power. In the "Ode", the ominous noise and fire of the Parousia were simply plucked from Scripture to denote the appearance of the risen, judgmental Christ and the approaching end of the world. In Paradise Lost, natural disasters proceed out of Christ's own person, surrounding him and engulfing his enemies.

And the third sacred Morn began to shine
 Dawning through Heav'n: forth rush'd with whirl-wind sound
 The Chariot of Paternal Deity,
 Flashing thick flames, Wheel within Wheel, undrawn,

Itself instinct with Spirit, but convey'd
 By four Cherubic shapes, four Faces each
 Had wondrous, as with Stars thir Bodies all
 And Wings were set with Eyes, with Eyes the Wheels
 Of Beryl, and careering Fires between;
 Over thir heads a crystal Firmament,
 Whereon a Sapphire Throne, inlaid with pure
 Amber, and colors of the show'ry Arch.
 Hee in Celestial Panoply all arm'd
 Of radiant Urim, work divinely wrought,
 Ascended, at his right hand Victory
 Sat Eagle-wing'd, beside him hung his Bow
 And Quiver with three-belted Thunder stor'd,
 And from about him fierce Effusion roll'd
 Of smoke and bickering flame, and sparkles dire;
 He onward came, far off his coming shone,
 And twenty thousand (I thir number heard)
 Chariots of God, half on hand were seen:
 Hee on the wings of Cherub rode sublime
 On the Crystalline Sky, in Sapphire Thron'd. (P. L. VI, 748-771)

Milton builds upon the "Ode's" rather sketchy treatment of the risen, heroic Christ by adding on a full characterization of Christ as warrior in actuality and not simply in potentia. Furthermore, the central feature of Milton's Christology in the "Ode" is maintained throughout the description of battle in Paradise Lost. Like the "great Infant" of the "Nativity Ode," the warrior Christ of the later epic never actually engages the enemy in mortal combat, for they flee before his wrathful visage. Christ is pure, absolute and self-sufficient power, actively seeking his foe, yet totally irresistible and victorious. Unlike Satan who exhibits energy vainly expended, concocting useless weapons and uprooting trees, Christ holds his full strength wisely in check, for he does not need a nominal test of his power.

...Full soon
 Among them he arriv'd; in his right hand
 Grasping ten thousand Thunders, which he sent
 Before him, such as in thir Souls infix'd
 Plagues; they astonisht all resistance lost,
 All courage; down thir idle weapons dropp'd;
 O'er Shields and Helms, and helmed heads he rode
 Of Thrones and mighty Seraphim prostrate,
 That wish't the Mountains now might be again

Thrown on them as a shelter from his ire...
 Yet half his strength he put not forth, but check'd
 His Thunder in mid Valley, for he meant
 Not to destroy, but to root them out of Heav'n... (P. L. VI, 835-843,
 853-855)

It is clear that Milton's portraits of Christ in both the "Ode" and Paradise Lost focus on the official, mediating function of Christ not as Catholic martyr but as Puritan Second Adam. Along with the descriptions of Christ as warrior, the descriptions of Christ as Judge in Book X of Paradise Lost concentrate on the passionless, cool aspect of Christ as "mild Judge and intercessor." He is shown to be devoid of any recognizably frail, mortal traits and is governed instead by reason and justice.

Now was the Sun in Western cadence low
 From Noon, and gentle Airs due at thir hour
 To fan the Earth now wak'd, and usher in
 The Ev'ning cool, when he from wrath more cool
 Came the mild Judge and Intercessor both
 To sentence Man: the voice of God they heard
 Now walking in the Garden, by sonft winds
 Brought to thir Ears... (P. L. X, 91-99)

This portrait again follows from its original source in the "Ode." Just as the judgmental Christ of Paradise Lost tempers Justice with Mercy, so the "dreadfull Judge" of the "Ode" who inspires the routing of pagan oracles has a softer side. The apocalypse or "worlds last session" is not the holocaust predicted in Revelation but a brief, anticlimactic flashback to the tender Bethlehem Nativity, now a powerful scene linking Christ's function as powerful, awesome judge to his merciful ministry on earth.

So when the Sun in bed,
 Curtain'd with cloudy red,
 Pillows his chin upon as Orient wave,
 The flocking shadows pale,
 Troop to th'inferrall jail,
 Each fetter'd Ghost slips to his sererall grave,
 And the yellow-skirted Fayes,
 Fly after the Night-steeds, leaving their Moon-lov'd maze.

But see the Virgin blest,
 Hath laid her Babe to rest,
 Time is our tedious Song should here have ending,
 Heav'ns youngest teemed Star,
 Hath fixt her polish't Car,
 Her sleeping Lord with Handmaid Lamp attending.
 And all about the Courtly Stable,
 Bright-harnest Angels sit in order serviceable. (st. 26-27)

For Milton, the battle in which Christ engages his evil foe, translated into moral terms, is one that must be renewed daily. And it is not, as Prudentius' and Spenser's hymns suggest, a battle limited to past history and Christian mythology. Milton's notion of Christ as warrior and judge reflects again the Puritan notion of faith perceived as a private moral contest within the dévot's own soul between Satan, as principle of evil, and Christ, as arbiter of good. This view of Puritan martial morality in which the warrior-Christ strongly figured was a frequent theme in the people's diaries and in the Puritan sermons to the congregations.

In the diaries of the Puritans Richard Rodgers and Samuel Ward, one main theme emerges: the interpretation of man's moral behaviour in terms of a battle between good and evil. Strict Calvinist doctrine strongly rejected good works as a means to salvation in favor of predestination, a tenet Calvin amended and emphasized in his later thought because of the assurance he felt it offered to regenerate man. Yet in actual practice, the average English Puritan felt little comfort with predestination. The diaries, for example, in their dramatization of the psychomachia in the average layman's soul show a surprising concern with proper ethical behaviour. The intensity with which the battle with Satan was visualized and the frequency of the diarists' self-accusations suggest that the authors seemed to feel some amount of Arminianism or control over their own actions. In Rodgers' and Wards' diaries from the turn of the 17th century, anxiety was only felt to be a temporary state and the conflict for the dévot's

soul was expected to be resolved and election assured.⁸⁵

Puritan preachers in the 17th century played upon the theme of contest extensively; in the diaries, the battle was a lonely one, fought only by the dévot against the devil, since suffering or sin was not part of the Calvinist view of Christ. I have discovered, however, that in the sermons, the battle between vice and virtue was given a dramatic, heroic turn in that it was rendered as a metaphorical battle between Christ and Satan. The events in this battle were not the traditional medieval ones associated with the martial Christ on the cross. Rather, the Puritan notion of battle, of which the "Nativity Ode" is a model, looked to legendary, extra-Biblical events which in the course of church history had become accepted as dogma -- in particular, the war in heaven, the Last Judgment and the Harrowing of Hell.

Whether fought by the dévot or by Christ, the battle with the devil was a symbolic one with moral implications. The dévot, in examining his own conscience did not turn to Christ's life as a mirror for the suffering in his own. Christ, instead, was somehow yanked free of his earthly sojourn and became a rather static, impersonal figure, man's champion in a battle with the Vice-figure Satan. Christ became a model for day-to-day behaviour not for his sacrifice but because he embodied all that was positive and heroic in a regenerate Christian -- namely, obedience to God's Word, an active, striving will, and with a "setled firmnes in fitnes to some part of duty." This notion of Christ as moral exemplar is reflected in Milton's Son who as both "youngest teem'd star" of the "Ode" or as creator of the universe in Paradise Lost, fashioning the perimeters of the world with two golden compasses (VII, 225-233), is shown to be the "axle of discipline" or principle of order and obedience upon which the "moments

and turnings of human occasions" revolve.

In an overall sense, then, the "Ode" offers not only obvious superficial similarities of plot with Paradise Lost but doctrinal and structural similarities as well. Over and beyond the ideate, powerful portrait of Christ, a portrait of Christian heroism that persists throughout Milton's religious epics, Milton offers in the "Ode" a structural preview of Paradise Lost, one built upon the notion of eschatological history and moral struggle current in contemporary Puritan thought. We have mentioned the apocalyptic quality of the "Ode" with respect to Milton's portrayal of Christ in his aspects as warrior and judge. Yet largely the entire poem teaches that history is a harsh lesson by which mankind must be judged.

Milton's shuttling back and forth in time renders the principle event, whether Incarnation or fall of man, as a core of meaning constantly accumulating significance throughout the poem, not as one specific moment, but as a prism through which the entire process of redemption can be glimpsed. Both the "Ode" and Paradise Lost show that the types and shadows before Jesus are all made clear and meaningful by the historical verity of Jesus' Incarnation and life. Moreover, events in his life explicitly affirm that "temporal events are the record of divine judgments."

In the "Nativity Ode" history is shown to be a teacher: events are glimpsed not simply for their realistic or dramatic effects but for the degree to which they contribute to a full understanding of the Incarnation as source and proof of divine law. We are shown that the Nativity is the focal point of redemptive history, for in Christ's birth, the whole span of human time is fulfilled; the final judgment of man promises Christ's ultimate victory over the fiend. Thus, in the poem, the ministry and suffering of Jesus is de-emphasized, for it is his apotheosis as Redeemer,

a role which underlies his temporary disguise as mortal infant, which Milton insists on.

In Paradise Lost, too, Milton omits from history events in which the redemptive end of history is not confirmed. All of time is made to express the saving power of faith. Again, in Michael's review of Christ's life in Book XII, what is most emphasized by Milton are those events contributing to his power in overcoming error -- the Harrowing of Hell, the Resurrection. Christ, as Messiah, is seen to live out his term on earth as a legal fulfillment of God's contract with man for man's ultimate salvation. Christ's suffering is rendered by Michael not to induce pathos in Adam nor to inspire a sense of personal unworthiness, but is recounted in spare, legalistic language confirming God's covenant or contract with mankind.

The Law of God exact he shall fulfill,
 Both by obedience and by love, though love
 Alone fulfill the Law; thy punishment
 He shall endure by coming in the Flesh
 To a reproachful life and cursed death,
 Proclaiming Life to all who shall believe
 In his redemption, and that his obedience
 Imputed becomes theirs by Faith, his merits
 To save them, not thir own, though legal works,
 For this he shall live hated, be blasphemed,
 Seiz'd on by force, judg'd, and to death condemn'd
 A shameful and accurst, nail'd to the Cross
 By his own Nation, slain for bringing Life;
 But to the Cross he nails thy Enemies,
 The Law that is aginst thee, and the sins
 Of all mankind, with them there crucifi'd,
 Never to hurt them more who rightly trust
 In this his satisfaction; so he dies,
 But soon revives, Death over him no power
 Shall long usurp; ere the third dawning light
 Return, the Stars of Morn shall see him rise
 Out of his grave, fresh as the dawning light,
 Thy ransom paid, which Man from death redeems,
 His death for Man, as many as offer'd Life
 Neglect not, and the benefit embrace
 By Faith not void of works: this God-like act
 Annuls thy doom, the death thou shouldst have di'd,
 In sin for ever lost from life; this act
 Shall bruise the head of Satan, crush his strength... (P. L. XII, 402-430)

Like the musica mundana sung at the world's creation by the "sons of morning," like the symphony of the angels at Christ's birth, Milton's art heralds a new order of being by re-creating as poetic fictions in the "Ode" those doctrinal tenets prophesied by the birth itself -- the re-establishing of a golden age or religious community on earth, the defeat of Satan and the rejection of sin in man.

Such Musick (as tis said)
 Before was never made,
 But when of old the sons of morning sun,
 While the Creator Great
 His constellations set,
 And the well-ballanc't world on hinges hung,
 And cast the dark foundations deep,
 And bid the weltring waves their oozy channel keep.

Ring out ye Crystall spheres,
 Once bless our human ears,
 (If ye have power to touch our senses so)
 And let your silver chime
 Move in melodious time;
 And let the Base of Heav'ns deep Organ blow
 And with your ninefold harmony
 Make up full consort to th'Angellike symphony.

For if such holy Song
 Enwrap our fancy long,
 Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
 And speck'led vanity
 Will sicken soon and die,
 And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,
 And Hell itself will pass away,
 And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day. (st. 12-14)

The "Nativity Ode" occupies a truly unique position in devotional literary history: it is at once the supreme artistic achievement of Nativity verse as a whole, while it also affirms the poet's Puritanism, a faith which was not especially congenial to poetic devotion and which was fundamentally at odds with the concept of Incarnation, that is, with the humbling of divinity into mortality.

The scholarship on the "Ode" is so rich and substantial that I have chosen in this chapter to rest on the shoulders of the many able Miltonists

from whose work I have profited, especially the work of J. B. Broadbent on the "Ode." However, the emphasis upon a particular constellation of insights is, at least, my own. In focusing on the Puritan aspects of the work -- its millenarianism, and its prefiguring of important Christological features in the Puritan epic Paradise Lost -- I have attempted to account for what I believe to be the most unconventional feature in the work: that it does not deal with the theme of the newly born Jesus of the Gospels but with the redemptive, regal and judgmental Christus Victor of the Reformers. Yet Milton accomplishes so gracefully in this poem the unusual creation of a Puritan devotional poem that the "Ode" advances and re-shapes the vernacular tradition of Nativity verse and becomes an important and influential milestone in that tradition.

IV

Henry Vaughan

Henry Vaughan's pessimistic, philosophical Nativity poems published in Silex Scintillans (1650, 1655) bring to a close the brief but brilliant literary phase of Nativity poetry through the 17th century. Vaughan's works are the most original and unusual I have encountered among Nativity poems of the Renaissance, primarily because of their often cryptic doctrine, bleak moralism and informal tone. They are also the most historically interesting works within this century and appear to prefigure a growing secularism in Nativity verse which would intensify in the subsequent centuries. Vaughan's Nativity lyrics, three of which directly concern the traditional theme of Christmas, such as "Christ's Nativity," "The Shepherds," "The Search," and others like "Retreat," which deal with related themes of human innocence and birth, greatly extend the traditional limits of the Nativity theme by offering new variations of Scriptural interpretations of the birth, more irregular poetic forms and a more digressive, unschematic poetic. Vaughan's works are unique literary expansions of the Nativity and appear to diverge sharply in theology and imagery from the main body of 17th century didactic and lyric verse dealing directly with the dogma of the Nativity.

To my mind, Vaughan's Nativity poems do not fit comfortably into any historical channel of Nativity verse; they do not share Milton's and Crashaw's neoclassical and heroic foundations; nor do they seem to be directly influenced by the eucharistic, instructional tradition of vernacular Nativity verse stemming from the medieval Christmas carol. Vaughan's works appear to be the product of his own reading in Scripture and theology and thus have a more private dimension than the other Renaissance Nativity

works do. They are, however, important transitional works linking the Renaissance literary phase of Nativity verse, in which dogma and poetic artistry coincided so well, with the Nativity poems of the 18th and 19th centuries, in which the Nativity was often combined with and eclipsed by secular themes. In this respect, Vaughan appears to have some affinity with William Blake's pastorals in Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789) and Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" (1802) in that Vaughan employs the theme to teach not solely the satisfying message of Christ's redemption and sacrifice or nature's renewal but also the sad reality of man's alienation from the transcendental. Vaughan, then, in my estimation, is the first to use the Nativity as an ironic theme against which man's present moral capacity is measured and found wanting. Specifically, he offers Nativity works in which the infant Christ is noticeably absent, or, in some cases, substituted by an idealized human child.

Most scholarship about Vaughan has attempted to account for his unusual, original quality while yet aligning him with the more orthodox of his predecessors in devotional poetry. Joan Bennet and E. C. Pettet, for example, have made much of Vaughan's borrowings from George Herbert.⁸⁷ Frank Kermode, Helen White and Louis Martz, however, have also recognized that Vaughan's personal, esoteric messages, atypical of the communal truths espoused by George Herbert, mark Vaughan as a "learned layman," as a new kind of devotional poet whose work is governed not by inherited, publically known religious symbols and Biblical themes but by a private "creative" mythology derived from a vast knowledge of occultism, religious mysticism, the Old Testament, from childhood memories of the Welsh countryside and from his personal political beliefs.⁸⁸

However, Vaughan's departure from tradition and his remarkable

originality in poetic style and spirit cannot wholly be attributed to a private body of symbols or a personal mythology. He is very much a man of his era, receptive to and motivated by the ideas and intellectual currents in his society. In this section, I hope to put forth the unorthodox argument that Vaughan draws upon a general body of attitudes and associations conventionally associated with the Puritans and Dissenters rather than with those of the Anglicans who still preserved much of the orthodox features of the birth from the medieval Catholic poetic tradition. It is this subtle yet encompassing affinity with Puritan thought that accounts for his private interpretations of Biblical themes and that marks his work as decidedly "foreign" in contrast with other Nativity poems of this period. In particular, Vaughan adopts the method of self-examination in terms of an "inner light" theology which was common among the many Dissenting sects of the period.

Although it is impossible to establish with certainty a Puritan influence in Vaughan's poems, since biographical evidence is so slender, the possibility of Vaughan's Puritan leanings has occurred to another besides myself. G. B. Christopher, in attempting to pinpoint the source of Vaughan's originality, has recently attributed the "numinous air and curious sentience" of Vaughan's works to Calvinist piety. Christopher argues that Vaughan may have retrieved Calvinist ideas of nature from Renaissance songs.⁸⁹ Yet to my mind, Vaughan's poems display a more direct knowledge of Puritan theology than that through secular music. I hope to suggest in the following pages that Vaughan shared analytical methods and ideas with Puritan diarists and meditators, notably with Richard Baxter in The Saints Everlasting Rest.

To my mind, Vaughan's Nativity poems are closest in doctrine to

Milton's "Ode," for both poets share the same aversion to eucharistic attitudes, the same legalistic, moralistic interpretation of the Bible and a similar belief in a mystic, hierarchical Neoplatonic universe. Unlike the learned, rational Milton, however, Vaughan appears to turn toward the more mystical ideas espoused by the more extreme Puritan sects, and shows a greater sympathy with popular religious thought like that of the Puritan divine, Richard Baxter. Like the Dissenters, Vaughan appears to have a deep belief in the irrational, intuitive processes of religious experience, in the transcendent spirit that lies behind nature's veil and in the habit of solitary, unsystematic soul-searching and digressive rumination popularized by Puritan "meditators" like Baxter.

One must admit, however, that Vaughan's doctrinaire Puritanism is impossible to prove. Judging from his youthful Royalist loyalties and from evidence in his poetry, Vaughan appeared to be a bitter foe of the Parliamentarians and despised many of their fundamental tenets.⁹⁰ Rather, I have attributed Vaughan's eclecticism and haphazard borrowings from his erstwhile Puritan enemies to an intellectual or ideological kinship with them and a growing dearth of traditional devotional poetic forms and symbols accessible to the average layman of the English church, for whom the ancient symbols and mysteries had exhausted their currency and held no more relevance in their lives.

The generalized Puritan influence on Vaughan is especially visible in his use of the Nativity theme, a Biblical motif which, for Vaughan, set forth a radically new, paradigmatic relationship between the poet or dévot and deity. In Vaughan's Nativity poems, since religious truth cannot be discovered by mediating processes such as the re-living of Christ's life or by public prayer or devotion, the ground for discovery of God becomes

the poet's own heart, his own recovery of childhood innocence or of a sense of religious renewal. Although the traditional theme of Christ's Nativity is the subject for only two specific poems -- "The Shepherds" and "Christ's Nativity" -- and two related poems on Christ's life -- "The Incarnation and the Passion" and "The Search" -- in a larger sense, Christ's Incarnation and birth is the core of Vaughan's faith and the integrating principle governing the major recurrent images in his poetry. The Nativity theme is absorbed into ambiguous, abstract symbols from nature, the Old Testament, or occult literature such as human exile, human childhood, or natural light. Thus although the Gospel theme of Christmas is enriched by an anthropomorphic dimension, the Christological foundations of the theme are weakened by its extension into objects from secular life or by its association with human childhood. The intimate, intense, characteristically "Puritan" relationship between dévot and deity, without the viability of Christ's mediating life, is affirmed in Vaughan's poetry in two ways: by the poet's discovery of signs of "Nativity" or spiritual renewal externally in nature or by the poet's search for marks of divinity in his own soul.

The first feature apparent in Vaughan's verse is his use of private natural symbols evoking the Incarnation, especially images relating to the themes of magnetism, regeneration and light. I have noted specifically the poems' possible backgrounds in the notions of divine immanence or the "inner light" of God in nature propounded by numerous radical sects of the mid-century. Men like the Seekers, the early Quakers and the groups of learned men loosely connected with the Puritan camp who revived various forms of Neoplatonism such as Hermeticism or "Cambridge" Platonism certainly appear to share Vaughan's conception of the sentient natural world.⁹¹

Basic to this belief in God's immanence in all created things was

the notion that the divine energy or "seeds" of God were communicated and infused into matter through a secondary agent. Although church tradition had bequeathed this creative principle to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, whose tasks at the creation were later usurped by Christ as Logos, the doctrine of immanence in the Renaissance generally ignored Christ's traditional role in creation. Instead, the "inner light" theology recalled the rational, deterministic thought of the ancient Stoics who spoke in very similar terms of logoi spermatikoi, seeds of a "divine fire" which, when implanted into living things at their origin caused their growth and development to the fullness of their form.⁹²

For Henry Vaughan, like the Puritan propounders of the "inner light," the musical, light-filled animistic universe associated throughout church history with the night of Christ's birth, becomes the picture of the universe in general. In the poem, "Quicknesse", Vaughan sets forth his basic definition of the incarnational principle inherent in life by describing metaphorically the mysterious interpenetration of divine into human spheres:

But life is, what none can expresse,
A quicknesse which my God hath kist. (ll. 19-20)⁹³

It is not the historic processes of Christ's life (as Herbert believes) which embody the creative energy or "kissing" of earth by God. Since the historic Christ is an inaccessible figure to Vaughan, it is the Book of Nature which figures forth the deity. The Incarnation in its traditional sense of the infusion of divinity into Mary's womb, therefore, becomes not a historic event but a metaphor for the sacramental created universe. Vaughan's mysterious, elusive view of Christ's Incarnation -- one which generalized the event into a miraculous, "scientific" exchange of properties between the worlds of matter and spirit -- was shared by his brother

Thomas. Thomas Vaughan himself describes the Incarnation in Anima Magica Abscondita as "a magical repository of all the secret correspondences in the universe,"⁹⁴ an idea which his brother Henry would use in his Nativity poems to denounce the blind error of contemporary Englishmen.

Vaughan's poetry sets forth a paradisial ideal shared by his brother of what man can become when imitating the "true philosophy" set forth by Christ's Incarnation as mirrored in the orderly processes of nature. In his two main poems on the Nativity, however ("Christ's Nativity," "The Shepherds") and another related poem on Christ's life ("The Search"), this optimistic vision is an elusive thing, negated by Vaughan's profound despair at man's frailty and corruption. Whereas the creatures and heavenly bodies evidence the spark of divinity readily, man, though higher on the chain of being, does not.

Christ, too, is as elusive and unattainable as the society of regenerate men. The one poem written expressly on the topic of Christmas, "Christ's Nativity," shows the inaccessibility of the newborn Christ to the poet, and, by extension, the disappearance of what Thomas Vaughan terms the "close connections" between God and Nature affirmed by that miracle. Unlike its supposed model, Herbert's "Christmas," the poet does not meet directly the figure of infant and mother. In the poem's first part, the focus is on the dévot who appears not as a participant in an ever-present, protracted Nativity scene, but one who returns in memory to the site of the crèche in the symbolic guise of "bird" or "star." The two images do not relate to the traditional symbols of Nativity like the rising sun or nesting and dying phoenix used by poets like Herbert or Crashaw to evoke the redemptive or martyred aspects of Christ. These particular images appear to be references to objects in Nature, objects

which, because of their greater obedience to the orderly processes of nature, reflect more readily than man the Edenic, incarnational state of grace.

...I would I were some Bird, or Star,
Fluttering in woods, or lifted far
Above this Inne
And Rode of sin!
Then either Star, or Bird should be
Shining, or singing still to thee. (ll. 13-18)⁹⁵

The rest of the first part of the poem abandons the brief references to natural images, and develops instead not the envied "disguise" of bird or star, but the dévot's true nature as miserable penitent approaching Christ's manger in memory. The movement to Gospel details of the birth, however, evidences a frustrating inability to envision or to experience the Bethlehem scene. This is so because the incarnational juncture of matter and spirit achieved by creatures like birds or heavenly bodies like the constellations cannot be achieved by frail and "obscene" man. Vaughan recounts only fleeting and imperfect metaphorical impressions of Christ's life from manger to "Rode of sin." The traditional church symbols of Nativity and Passion, Christ's crib and cross, have exhausted their meaning for Vaughan: the poet seeks but never encounters specific associations surrounding those symbols. Christ himself appears to have disappeared from the world and from the compressed version of his life. Instead, the poet's disjointed persona figuratively searches manger and knocks at inn door, discovering that at either place, he is too unfitting and stained with sin to receive the proper understanding of Christ's birth.

Vaughan depicts his own frailty by making the persona as bodiless as the Christ for whom he seeks. The persona takes many points of view: he is at first a "high priest" singing of the birth in sensual tones reminiscent of the epithalamic Song of Songs. Then he is a mystic desiring to

become another, more holy form than lastly, a self-deprecating sinner.

The second part of the poem continues to assert the destruction of the incarnational, sacramental universe by man's failure to comprehend and apply the lesson of the Nativity. Yet here, the poet switches from a symbolic, narrative context to a prosaic, homiletic one. Vaughan abandons the use of natural and Biblical symbols and, like an angry preacher, directs a series of bitter rhetorical questions at the reader, chastising him for man's ignoring of two pivotal religious feasts, Christmas and Christ's "bloody passions" at Easter. Like the Puritan Milton, Vaughan here looks to Scriptural themes like the Nativity as signs of God's law revealed to mankind: the Nativity offers a clear standard by which to judge or legislate moral behaviour. Unfortunately, the message taught is a bleak one: the inaccessibility of Christ in memory and through the re-living of Scriptural history is balanced in this second part of the poem by Christ's inaccessibility in the world.

In one sense, Vaughan may be referring to a political issue -- to the abnegation of the traditional sacraments by the Presbyterians. In a larger sense, however, Vaughan is again referring to the defying of the incarnational principle in nature. The result of men's rejection of the Christmas feast is larger than the political shift of leadership or the neglect of favorite holidays. Rather, Vaughan makes a probing examination of the effects on nature and on human society of ignoring the birth. Against the musica mundana Vaughan balances a helpless, impotent and introspective mankind, unable to produce any musical notes and taking the harsh unlovely form of "stone" and "Earth." By envisioning man through these unresponsive, inanimate images from nature, Vaughan has asserted man's utter demotion from his place of privilege in the chain of being, and

thus has shown that the entire system of correspondences in the universe is broken, the incarnational principle unrenewed.

How kind is heav'n to man! If here
 One sinner doth amend
 Strait there is Joy, and ev'ry sphere
 In musick doth Contend;
 And shall we then no voices lift?
 Are mercy and salvation
 Not worth our thanks? Is life a gift
 Of no more acceptation?
 Shall he that did come down from thence,
 And here for us was slain,
 Shall he be now cast off? no sense
 Of all his woes remain?
 Can neither Love, nor suff'rings bind?
 Are we all stone, and Earth?
 Neither his bloody passions mind,
 Nor one day blesse his birth?
 Alas, my God! Thy birth now here
 Must not be numbred in the year. (ll. 31-48)

The other main poem on the topic of Christmas, "The Shepherds," is even more heavy with moralism than "Christ's Nativity." Yet though generally uninteresting as poetry, the poem does offer an intriguing use of natural symbols and concrete details taken from the Old Testament to evoke the incarnational "inner light" theology that Vaughan seems to share with the Dissenters of this time. The poem praises the Bethlehem shepherds as descendants of the early nomadic patriarchs of the Old Testament who also were bequeathed a "holy promise" by God. Like the shepherds, the patriarchs are praised for the kind of pastoral innocence or innate divinity that Vaughan associates with the Old Testament patriarchal era. What he appears to depict in the "pastures and clear springs" of ancient Jerusalem or Bethlehem, holy cities which are populated by these pastoral images and figures, is a metaphorical form of the pre-lapsarian state of grace in Eden, a kind of "childhood of the race" in Scriptural history when natural innocence abounded. The vegetation and flowing fountain imagery contained in this first part are for Vaughan favorite images denoting the regenerative,

self-purifying power inherent in the natural universe and frequently associated with his view of Paradise.

Sweet harmless livers! on whose holy leisure
 Waits innocence and pleasure:
 Whose leaders to those pastures and clear springs
 Were patriarchs, saints and kings;
 How happened it that in the dead of night
 You only saw true light,
 While Palestine was fast asleep and lay
 Without one thought of day?
 Was it because those first and blessed swains
 Were also pilgrims on those plains
 When they received the promise, for which now
 'Twas then first shown to you? (ll. 1-12)⁹⁶

The parallel between the Nativity of the Gospels and the Davidic scenes of the patriarchal narratives is made explicit by Vaughan's comparison of the Old and New Testament shepherds to wretched, present-day "Salem" or England, which appears to ignore the vision and promise of Old Testament covenant and Gospel Nativity. What is identified with English contemporary life after the Royalist defeat is Eden after the fall: the modern Jerusalem offers only empty and massive buildings devoted to luxury and pride, and all of "Salem's" inhabitants, like the sleeping "seers" of Bethlehem, are polluted with sin and heedless of the vision seen by simple shepherds.

Tis true He loves that dust whereon they go
 That serve Him here below,
 And therefore might for memory of those
 His love there first disclose:
 But wretched Salem, once His love, must now
 No voice nor vision know;
 Here stately piles with all their height and pride
 Now languished and died,
 And Bethlehem's humble cots above them slept
 While all her seers slept;
 Her cedar fir, hewed stones, and gold were all
 Polluted through their fall;
 And those once sacred mansions were now
 Mere emptiness and show. (ll. 13-26)

Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of the poem is, like "Christ's Nativity," its immediate political attack by Vaughan on Cromwellian Eng-

land which he sees as morally weak and religiously unsound. Or, possibly Vaughan is attacking the rotten effects of civilization in his bleak comparison of the Edenic "springs and pastures" of the Old Testament to the "cedar, fir, hewed stones and gold" of post-lapsarian urban England, standing perilously like the temple built by Solomon. What Vaughan shows in his use of Scriptural themes in this poem is the turning of the Nativity theme away from its orthodox New Testament message of reconciliation and redemption to a private understanding of Bethlehem as a corollary for Canaan, of the Nativity as another symbol for patriarchal innocence and the ideal, incarnational universe. Against this ideal world governed by this abstract interpretation of the Nativity, Vaughan opposes an apocalyptic vision of a corrupt and immoral contemporary society.

In addition to images taken from nature which recall the incarnational, animistic universe espoused by Puritan proponents of the "inner light," Vaughan's Nativity poems exhibit a second major feature, also traceable to Puritan sources. Vaughan's poems emphasize human marks of divinity rather than describe the divinity in Christ's person. In this notion, Vaughan comes close to reproducing in his Nativity poems the autobiographical struggle of the Puritan diarists. Vaughan's concern for the human rather than the Christological dimension of religious experience can be related again to the inaccessibility of the Biblical Christ for him. Although he was not nominally a Puritan, like many men associated with the Puritan camp, Vaughan saw Christ as pure negativity, as a being who, though glorious, achieves definition by the omission of direct description. In "Christ's Nativity," Christ was shown to be a vague, slightly menacing and reproachful force. In "The Shepherds," Christ is noticeably absent from the scenes of his birth and is referred to only obliquely in terms of his

ministry as a "true light" or "promise." This notion of Christ is especially evident in probably the most skillfully wrought, most imaginative poem of Vaughan dealing with the life of the historic Jesus, "The Search."

It is a highly original work, using the framework of the familiar recitation of Christ's life, yet it argues against the conventional Christian notion of using Christ's life as a mirror of human experience. It appears to be vastly different from its supposed model, Herbert's poem by the same name. Although both treat similar themes of searching for Christ through a Scriptural landscape, Herbert's is much more traditional and stylized. Herbert's "The Search" looks specifically to the Song of Songs and the erotic summoning of Christ the Bridegroom by his Spouse, the Church. Most importantly, Herbert's poem moves to a final meeting with the deity and ends with the turning of the "God" whom he searches for toward the poet and with the fusion of dévot and deity.

When thou dost turn, and wilt be neare;
 What edge so keen
 What point so piercing can appeare
 To come between?

For as thy absence doth excell
 All distance known:
 So doth thy nearnesse bear the bell
 Making two one. (ll. 53-60)⁹⁷

Vaughan's "The Search," however, never ends with the poet's sense of repose and his coalescence with Christ; rather, the poet is frustrated at every point at which he believes to have met or discovered Christ. Although the end has an affirmative tone, Vaughan is more expectant and anticipatory than Herbert, and can only conclude that his apprehension of Christ's nearness is an act of faith. And even in affirming this, Vaughan does not use his own language, for this, too, would be another vain attempt to summon Christ on man's, not Christ's, terms. Instead, he goes to the

Bible for his conclusion and affirms Christ's nearness in language accepted as God's own:

(Acts Chap. 17:27, 28) That they should seeke the Lord, if happily they might feele after him, and find him, though he be not far off from every one of us, for in him we live, and move, and have our being.⁹⁸

The originality of this work has largely been ignored by most critics of Vaughan. For example, "The Search" has been interpreted by the scholar Louis Martz as a 17th century version of a medieval meditation on the life of Christ, a supposition that is certainly well-argued by Martz.⁹⁹ Yet although the poet does outline major incidents from Christ's life, to my mind, the direction and spirit of the poem seems antithetical to Cistercian, Franciscan or Ignatian meditation and much more representative of the more unschematic method of Puritan self-examination.

In the Puritan diaries as we have used previously in the section on Milton's "Ode," for example, there is the same lonely, private struggle for faith as in poems like Vaughan's "The Search." This kind of personal struggle is evident to a large extent among Anglican poets like Herbert or Donne who frequently looked to Ignatian meditation as a structural model for their poetry. However, these later poetic meditations and their medieval antecedents attempt primarily to revivify the image of the historic Christ in the mind of the meditator through a systematic, intellectual process of recalling and elaborating details from Scripture. Indeed, as the many Renaissance translations of Bernard of Clairvaux's meditations on the cross show, the end of Anglican and Catholic meditation was the re-experiencing of the crucifixion through Christ's own point of view.¹⁰⁰

Yet it appears to me that in the diaries and in "The Search," there is an obvious absence of liturgical objects or Scriptural details evoking the memory of the historic Jesus. Rather, the dévot's own past behaviour

and his own point of view become the ground for recall and examination.

In "The Search," Christ is totally absent from the familiar scenes of his life as elucidated in the Gospel. Indeed, the entire meditative process or the seeking of Christ through literal objects connected with his life is rejected.

Leave, leave, thy gadding thoughts;
 Who pores
 And spies
 Still out of Doores
 descries
 Within them nought. (ll. 75-80)

As Vaughan here argues, one cannot "find" Christ in mentally revisiting the historic sites in Christ's life, since man's reason and man's world are impure.¹⁰¹ The spiritual truth sought by the poet is not associated with the person of Christ. Indeed, it is a more generalized attempt to achieve personal illumination (a state not achieved in this particular poem) apprehended in "another world," the unexplored interior "world" of the poet's soul. The ground for discovery of this insight is, therefore, his personal "search" for God, which is the central issue in the work.

Rather than a systematic Ignatian meditation of Christ's life, I hope to establish that "The Search" is much closer to the Puritan diaries: I have discovered that, like the diaries, it is a highly metaphorical, emotional and digressive investigation of the poet's own soul for marks of virtue and holiness. It appears to be vastly different from the Catholic meditative form in structure and purpose: Vaughan does not treat the traditional events surrounding Christ's life associated with meditation. Rather, he adds on new events which evolve into private symbols, such as Christ's stopping at Jacob's well in Samaria. There is no narrative progression or growing sense of verisimilitude in the poem: instead, Vaughan accumulates symbolic interpretations of Scriptural scenes. Each event

mentioned re-asserts the message that divinity in the world is absent and corruption has set in. Just as Christ has fled the site of the Passion because of the terrible cruelty of his malefactors, so he has fled the scenes of his childhood, infancy and birth. All that has been left of Bethlehem is a "small bright sparkle" in the ashes, originally the crib, a still glowing reminder of the inherent divinity in the world that may yet be re-ignited to "refine the whole."

'Tis now cleare day: I see a Rose
 Bud in the bright East, and disclose
 The Pilgrim-Sunne; all night have I
 Spent in a roving Extasie
 To find my Saviour; I have been
 As far as Bethlem, and have seen
 His Inne, and Cradle; Being there
 I met the Wise-men, askt them where
 He might be found, or what starre can
 Now point him out, grown up a Man?
 To Egypt hence I fled, ran o're
 All her parcht bosome to Nile's shore
 Her yearly nurse; came back, enquir'd
 Amongst the Doctors, and desir'd
 To see the Temple, but was shown
 A little dust, and for the Town
 A heap of ashes, where some sed
 A small bright sparkle was a bed,
 Which would one day (beneath the pole)
 Awake, and then refine the whole... (ll. 1-20)

At the poem's end, Vaughan further manipulates Christian history to reinforce the discomfoting message of man's alienation from the divine: he ends Christ's life not with the usual terminating event of the crucifixion but with Christ's sojourn in the wilderness. Yet Vaughan cuts off the comforting description of the scene just at the point where Christ is becoming real and accessible to the reader through the device of the appended "song." The disjointed voice of some divine singer breaks into the poet's reverie to assert once again the theme that mankind's efforts to see God are vain. Here Vaughan makes the final case that God's hidden truths come to man through God's, not man's, volition and that God exists

not in history but is inherent in the mysterious "other world" of man's psyche.

I'lle thither (to the desert) then; see, It is day,
 The Sun's broke through to guide my way.
 But as I urg'd thus, and write down
 What pleasures should my Journey crown,
 What silent paths, what shades, and Cells,
 Faire virgin-flowers, and hallow'd Wells
 I should rove in, and rest my head
 Where my deare Lord did often tread,
 Sugring all dangers with successe,
 Me thought I heard one singing thus;... (ll. 65-74)

These three main poems, "The Search," "Christ's Nativity" and "The Shepherds," which treat the theme of the Nativity in direct fashion create a symbolic, stark landscape populated by patriarchal figures, select objects from nature and an abstract or absent Christ. Rather than a detailed outline of Christ's life on earth as set forth in the Synoptic Gospels, Vaughan searches his memory and thus gives us random, often exaggerated or purposely piecemeal accounts. Seeing Christ, then, from the refracted angle of memory rather than through literal accounts in the Bible or traditional symbols from the liturgy, gives to Vaughan's poems about the Nativity a haunting and dreamlike unreality.

Vaughan's dependence on memory rather than reason or the more emotional will as the primary faculty of the mind governing the creation of his poems may be an important key to uncovering further his poetic models. Louis Martz has described very well Vaughan's dependence on memory as the primary creative faculty in many of the poems. Martz, too, asserts that Vaughan has many other, earlier sources for literature dependent on memory and cites in particular Augustine's Confessions and Bonaventura's Imitatio Christi. He points out important similarities between the works in their mutual use of memory, rather than on the interpretation and investigation of details outside the dévot's mind and in their use of

repetition and digression as structural principles. Martz, however, makes of this interconnectedness in method another genre of formal meditation, like Ignatian or Salesian meditation.¹⁰²

Yet even if such a category as "Augustinian" or "tumbling" meditation were historically valid, it is risky to assert that Vaughan, who had no clerical training, and whose reading in theology was eccentric and un-systematic, would be consciously imitating stylistic models like Augustine or Bonaventura.¹⁰³ Even the poem closest to formal meditation, "The Search," is more a rejection than a model of that form. Rather than imitating a formal category of religious meditation, Vaughan appears to be writing of private concerns and is imitating what may have been most accessible to him in the current popular religious thought of the day -- the general technique of self-examination loosely termed "meditation" by Puritan laymen and cleric alike.

In particular, I would like to draw a close comparison between Vaughan's method in "The Search" and the autobiographical method of religious "meditation" outlined by the Puritan divine Richard Baxter in his spiritual guide, The Saints Everlasting Rest. Since Baxter's treatise was published in 1650, the same year as the first edition of Silex Scintillans appeared, the close proximity between the two most probably resulted from a shared methodology, eventually schematized by Baxter and rendered in imaginative, poetic form by Vaughan, rather than from a direct influence.

If we take Baxter as an example of the prototypical Puritan spiritual autobiographer or diarist, one can see clear resemblances with Vaughan in their use of memory, their form, their technique of self-examination. Primarily, I have noted that the faculty of memory dictates the passive way in which the dévot or poet sees himself and the digressive form which

such "meditation" or poetry takes. Vaughan's poems are flooded with recurrent remembrances of the incarnate glorious deity found in nature which he couches in pastoral figures and nature symbols from the Old and New Testament and from Hermetic philosophy. Memory, too, is involved in his use of Herbert's poems: Vaughan employs phrases and lines from The Temple to give inspiration and a point of reference to his largely unsystematic theology. This is especially true in poems which deal with specific liturgical or Scriptural topics, like the Nativity, the Incarnation, the Passion. Vaughan's method of composition in this case may not have involved primary sources like the records of Christ's life in the Gospels, but perhaps to a secondary source -- the Gospel as filtered unevenly through his memory of random lines from Herbert's works on similar topics.¹⁰⁴

Yet because he depends on memory rather than on will or reason as a primary faculty governing the creating of his poems, what is set forth is not clearly elucidated, nor does the poetry move smoothly to a moral or "message" as so many didactic, religious poems on the topic of the Nativity do. Rather, the method of Vaughan's best poems is cumulative, digressive, marked by frequent repetitions and switches in time-sequences or points of view and moves disjointedly to a brief moment of insight. Vaughan's poems are a-symmetrical and are presented often in uneven, a-traditional stanzas, with quick switches in mood and form, often turning from a narrative sequence to an appended allegory or song.

In my view, what Vaughan is attempting to do is to show the quasi-active principle of the mind that constitutes memory. Vaughan's dependence on memory's role in devotion has a theological antecedent: Augustine describes the theological function of memory by showing how the recollection of the innate ideas of God (memoria Dei) becomes intertwined with the

recollection of one's self-image or historical identity (memoria sui) and how the entire process of memory becomes a distension of time and a dilation of soul.¹⁰⁵

Baxter, like Vaughan, looks to more formal, schematic literary models but ultimately rejects them for his own intuitive, digressive, recollective structure. Although he attempts to imitate the tripartite method of Jesuit meditation, he appears to alter this method in the light of Puritan self-searching, rather than to investigate traditional liturgical or Scriptural topics. Baxter appears to re-define "meditation" in terms of a more generalized, introspective devotional activity, which he loosely terms "extended prayer," one not dependent so much on ritual and discipline nor the exercise of the intellect or the will in proper feeling or action but concentrating instead on a private, passive view of salvation.¹⁰⁶

What is particularly significant about Baxter's teachings is the passive devotion it advocates. Although Puritan "meditation" is described metaphorically as "right traveling," this movement derives, in Baxter's view, from God, for "If God move us not we cannot move." And thus, the end of all meditation is a state of utter passivity and receptivity to a voluntaristic God, a sense of self-negation described as "rest," and a very similar attitude to the one described by Vaughan at the end of "The Search."

Rest is the end and perfection of motion. The Saints Rest here in Question is The most happy estate of a Christian having obtained the end of his course...all that ease and safety which a Soul, wearyed with the burthen of sin and suffering, and pursued by Law, Wrath and Conscience hath with Christ in this life; the Rest of Grace...it chiefly intends the Rest of eternal Glory as the end and main part.¹⁰⁷

Like Vaughan, Baxter's inactive pursuit of the deity, not through given, traditional objects or rules of devotion but through brief, haphazard moments of visionary insight, can be traced to an emphasis on

memory's role in developing the abstract and visionary state of "rest" or divine grace that is Baxter's goal. Although he acknowledges the part that reason and will play in meditation, Baxter accords memory a primary and pivotal role in the Puritan "meditative" process. For example, in his recollection of Christ, he cannot summon up a specific picture of the Passion, but instead visualizes a more general and more encompassing memory of God as Saviour which leads to a private and introspective joy.

If it be but by looking back, to help the soul to value its enjoyment, Our knowledge will be enlarged, not diminished; therefore, the knowledge of things past shall not be taken away. And what is that knowledge but Remembrance? Doubtless from that height, the Saint can look behind him and before him, remembering a lifetime of mercies... Reader, stop here, and think a while, what a state this is; Is it a small thing in thine eyes to be beloved of God? to be the Son, the Spouse, the Love, the delight of the King of Glory?¹⁰⁸

Both Vaughan and his Puritan contemporary, Richard Baxter, in their use of memory also establish a particular technique of self-examination which appears to be unique to the kind of literature governed by this faculty. We have mentioned in detail the private symbols which Vaughan uses out of his reading of the Old Testament and Hermetic philosophy, symbols which relate to nature or man's soul as the ground for which signs of divinity must be construed. Similarly, Baxter too looks to the faculty of memory in the Augustinian sense of a storehouse of ideas of self and God or in the Puritan sense of "conscience" or interpreter of morality. What memory attempts to do is to organize the self into a proper attitude in which devotion can take place. Baxter describes the action of memory as a pivotal foundation of devotion, as the "sweet and constant action of all the Powers of the Soul and Body in the fruition of God" unifying the affections into a "moral union." Thus the purpose of devotion inspired and structured by memory is a particularly Puritan notion of morality

and work. That is, Baxter counsels the meditator to read the signs in the world in order to permit the dévot to perform God's will and to become the obedient, and in Baxter's terms, "reasonable" servant of God.

It is to preach Duty to Christ; No more exact requirer of duty, or hate of Sin, then Christ. Christ hath done, and will do all his work, and therefore is a perfect Saviour; but yet leaves for us a work to do...on condition of beleiving, denying all for him, suffering with hym, persevering and overcoming.¹⁰⁹

Although Baxter never suggests specifically that the dévot search his own life for specific memories or signs of God's presence, that activity is implicit in his instructions to the dévot on how to accomplish the meditative process. Of the four main topics for meditation which he outlines, none is connected with Christ's historic sojourn on earth. Rather, they are abstract topics dealing primarily with the apocalypse in Revelation and center on the legalistic, moral end of religious devotion. In particular, Baxter emphasizes themes which focus on the judgmental Christ at the Parousia enthroned in heaven: "The Coming of God," "The raising of our Bodies and Uniting them with the Soul." All of these themes seem to ignore the human Christ of the Scriptures whose Passion inspired the majority of Catholic meditations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Baxter counsels the dévot to turn instead to the more glorious Christ apotheosized.

You need not here be troubled with the fears of the world, lest studying so much on these high matters, should craze your brains, and make you mad, unless you will go mad with delight, and joy, and that of the purest and most solid kinde. If I let you to meditate as much on Sin and Wrath, and to study nothing but Judgment and Damnation, then you might justly fear such as issue. But its Heaven and not Hell, that I would persuade you to exercise. I would urge you to look upon no deformed object, but only upon the ravishing glory of Saints, and the unspeakable excellencies of the God of Glory, and the beames that stream from the face of His Son.¹¹⁰

Baxter's instructions on following the four main topics of meditation based on the risen Christ are yet possibly difficult for him to follow. Generally, they lack literal details connected with the topics in Scripture, and thus the meditator would have no clear setting or dramatic experience from which to draw his meditation. They are topics that Baxter also finds difficult to develop. His outline of glorious meditative topics is quickly followed by a long passage on self-examination for signs of assured salvation. It is as if Baxter in meditation finds it impossible to focus his attention on the abstract glories of God, but must immediately search for God's reflected glory in himself. The process of seeking the assurance of grace in his own soul, an act of will which seems immediately to follow the brief communion with the deity brought about through the process of memory, is yet painful and unending. As in Vaughan's "The Search," the proofs of grace to Baxter are as elusive as the abstract, incarnate Christ: unbelief and uncertainty, one of the repetitive themes in Vaughan, must always remain in Baxter's understanding of self-analysis.

Lastly is presupposed, painfulness and weariness in our motion.
This ariseth not from any evil in the work or way; for Christs
yoke is easie, his burden light and his commands not grievous:
But from the opposition we meet with. The contrary principles
still remain in our nature...¹¹¹

The pessimistic view of man as a helpless recipient of an arbitrary grace, as a perennial exile from the deity, which Henry Vaughan shares with the Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, indicates to me that for both poet and preacher, traditional Scriptural themes such as the Nativity were no longer easy, comfortable ones in which to place one's faith. For Vaughan, the vision of the incarnate God comes more easily in other, non-religious "nativity" poems like "Retreate" which deal not with Jesus' childhood and birth but with idealized human infancy instead. What Vaughan

emphasizes in this poem is that the poet and everyman must be "born" to sinlessness and innocence, rather than look to outdated forms of public ritual devotion to the Christ child for one's personal apprehension of revelation and spiritual renewal. Without the credence in a historic Christ, human history is seen in "Retreate" to parallel and to incorporate what was once the province of "sacred history" or history defined by the events in Christ's life. Since Christ cannot be discovered by the re-living of his life in public prayer, as Vaughan stresses in "The Search," the ground of divinity becomes the Christian's own recovery of childhood innocence, which in "Retreate" is described as an "Angell-infancy" a state of Christ's Incarnation, and in which the human child is closest to the Christ child.

Happy those early dayes! When I
 Shin'd in my Angell-infancy.
 Before I understood this place
 Appointed for my second race,
 Or taught my soul to fancy ought
 But a white, Celestiall thought,
 When yet I had not walkt above
 A mile, or two, from my first love,
 And looking back (at that short space,)
 Could see a glimpse of his bright-face. (ll. 1-10)¹¹²

Yet Vaughan's notion of human childhood is not based on a secular faith: the context for Vaughan's idyllic depiction of human infancy is Christian Scripture, for the infancy here depicted in "Retreate" refers to Adam's and Eve's state of innocence or grace in Eden before their fall and also to the Old Testament era, the "childhood of the race" when natural virtue and innocence abounded. Vaughan, however, shows us in "The Search" and in "Retreate" the deliquescence or growing loss of potency of Scriptural themes like the Nativity which had long been topics for which Christians had traditionally reserved their greatest reverence and affection. Vaughan's relationship to Wordsworth, especially as a precursor of Wordsworth's

notion of human childhood, is not a direct one, for obviously, Vaughan is, unlike Wordsworth, a devotional poet. Yet one can see Vaughan as an important indicator of what was to come in the next centuries in the poets' rejection and adaptation of religious themes to suit an increasingly strong, overridingly secular world-view. Vaughan is the last major poet, aside from the anachronistic Christopher Smart or Gerard Manley Hopkins, interpreting the traditional, Biblical theme of the Nativity to the Christians of his age. After Vaughan, poets deal with it as a private symbol about which there no longer appears to be any general consensus of belief. Yet he brings to a close a remarkable century of poetic achievement in Nativity verse and one whose position in devotional literary history has yet to be superceded.

Notes to Chapter Three-- The Seventeenth Century

1

The parallel eucharistic and redemptive traditions which I am outlining here correspond generally to the "classical and neo-Latin" and vernacular traditions of Nativity poems sketched by J.B. Broadbent in "The Nativity Ode", The Living Milton, ed. F. Kermode (New York, 1960), pp. 12-17. I would disagree, however, with the placement of Crashaw's "Hymn" in Broadbent's scheme, however.

2

Rosamond Tuve's observation that Milton's "Nativity Ode" takes place in a supra-historical time scheme would hold true, to my mind, for Vaughan's poems as well. See Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 38-40.

3

The more literary nature of these Renaissance lyrical Nativity poems evolving out of the medieval doctrinal tradition has often confused earlier carol scholars who have attempted to classify them as "maverick" carols. See Douglas Brice's notion of "carolites" in The Folk-Carol of England, ch. 3.

4

L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, pp. 107-112.

5

Helen Gardner, introduction to her edition of The Metaphysical Poets, printed in Seventeenth Century English Poetry, ed. W.R. Keast (New York, 1962), p. 57.

6

The other striking use of the narration of Christ's life in Renaissance poetry is in Spenser's "An Hymne on Heavenly Love" (ll. 225-266). This narration is contained, however, in a primarily philosophical context.

7

Gardner notes some affinities in st.1. with phrases from the Advent Office; Thus Donne appears to be linked with poems like Dunbar's "Rorate" dealing with Christ as Logos. See Divine Poems, ed. H. Gardner (Oxford, 1952), pp. xxii-xxiv.

8

John Donne, "La Corona", Divine Poems, ed. Gardner, st. 5.

9

Donne, "La Corona", Divine Poems, ed. Gardner, st. 3.

10

Donne, "La Corona", Divine Poems, ed. Gardner, st.1.

11

Donne, "La Corona", Divine Poems, ed. Gardner, st.6.

12

Helen White, The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience (New York, 1962), 1st publ. 1936, ch. 7. White notes that Herbert's poems evidence a more internal, autobiographical struggle as opposed to Donne's more theological and doctrinal wrestling.

13

Ignatius Loyola, Exercitia Spiritualia, The Text of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius (Westminster, Md., 1943), repr., vol. I, p.79.

14

George Herbert, "Christmas", The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1967), repr., pp. 80-81.

15

R.L. of the 15th C., ed. Brown, no. 78.

16

Tuve's examination of the liturgical Nativity and Annunciation images (tabernacle, sun) in "Temper(I)" can also be applied to "Christmas". See A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago, 1952), pp. 139-143.

17

Rosamund Tuve, "George Herbert and Caritas", JWCI, XXII (1954), 303-331.

18

Helen Vendler, The Poetry of George Herbert (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), pp. 153-156.

19

In addition to the influence of Sternhold and Hopkins' version of the Psalms, there may be some linguistic influence on this poem by Sidney's Psalm translations, as L. Martz suggests in The Poetry of Meditation, p. 273. See also Coburn Freer, Music for a King: George Herbert's Style and the Metrical Psalms (Baltimore, 1972), pp. 116 ff. Freer, however, concentrates on a technical comparison between Herbert and Sternhold and Hopkins and misses the lyrical or thematic affinities Herbert has with the Scriptural David.

20

See Joseph Summers' discussion of Herbert as "parson in poetry" voicing a communal praise of the deity. George Herbert, His Religion and His Art (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), ch.5.

21

Ben Jonson, "A Hymn on the Nativity of my Saviour" from The Works of Ben Jonson, ed. C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford, 1925-52), vol. VIII, p. 130.

22

See Ralph Walker's discussion of Jonson's widening of the 16th century, half-religious notion of Courtesy into a more civilized, social vein. "Ben Jonson's Lyric Poetry", Criterion, XII (1933-34), 430-448.

23

For two good, recent discussions of Jonson as social commentator in his lyric verse, see Hugh MacLean, "Ben Jonson's Poems: Notes on the Ordered Society", Essays in English Literature from the Renaissance to the Victorian Age, ed. M. MacLure and F. Watt (Toronto, 1964), pp. 43-68; G.A.E. Parfitt, "Ethical Thought and Ben Jonson's Poetry", SEL, IX (1969), 123-134.

24

Robert Herrick, "An Ode on the Birth of Our Saviour", The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford, 1956), p. 345.

25

Yet in spite of its erotic overtones, the work is a serious religious poem characteristic of Herrick's personal, temporal faith. See M. Starkman's substantive article on Noble Numbers which investigates the particular "affective" quality of Herrick's poetic devotionism. Starkman argues that Herrick's work is a sophisticated domestication and personalization of inherited religious formulae. The Nativity poems exhibit Herrick's use of the religious ingenu as persona, a feature which Starkman traces to Herrick's identification of himself as poet-dévot with the infant Jesus. "Noble Numbers and the Poetry of Devotion", Reason and Imagination, ed. J.A. Mazzeo (New York, 1962), 1-27.

26

For a listing of pamphlets and broadsides defending the Christmas feast during the Interregnum and Restoration, see W. Schmauch, Christmas Literature Through the Centuries, ch. 1.

27

Jonson, "An Epigram to the Queen, Then Lying-In", Works, ed. Herford and Simpson, p. 237.

28

Herrick, "The Wassaile", Works, ed. Martin, p. 198.

29

Routley cites Arthur Bedford's faulty definition of "carol" as a poem written in the time of Charles I as evidence of the lack of understanding of the carol form in the 17th century. The English Carol, p. 88.

30

Bolton, "The Shepherd's Song", England's Helicon (1600), facsimile edition, (London, 1973), p. R3.

31

Herrick, "A Christmas Caroll sung as to the King in the Presence at Whitehall", Works, ed. Martin, p. 364.

32

All references to Crashaw's poetry, except where indicated, refer to the 1652 edition of poems.

33

G. Williamson, Six Metaphysical Poets (New York, 1967), pp. 133-136.

34

Broadbent, "The Nativity Ode", pp. 12-13.

For the European background to Crashaw's works, see Ruth Wallerstein, Richard Crashaw: A Study in Style and Poetic Development (Madison, Wis., 1935), ch. 4-5. Also Austin Warren, Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility (Ann Arbor, 1939), pp. 112 ff.

35

Early English Lyrics, ed. Sidgwick and Chambers, no. LXVII.

36

E.R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (New York, 1963), 1st publ. 1953, pp. 458-459. F.J.E. Raby, A History of Christian-Latin Poetry, pp. 16 ff.

For Renaissance pastoral conceptions of Christ in Elizabethan Puritan works and their Virgilian backgrounds, see Hiram Haydn, The Counter-Renaissance (New York, 1950), p. 121.

37

Compare Milton's notion of redemptive history with 20th century notions of eschatological Christian history. See Nathan Scott, The Broken Center (New Haven, 1966), pp. 64-65.

38

Richard Crashaw, "In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God" (1652), The Poems of Richard Crashaw, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford, 1966), 1st publ. 1927, pp. 106-108.

39

Francis Quarles, "A Feast for Wormes", Divine Poems (London, 1630), p. 4.

40

Austin Warren, Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility, pp. 130 ff.; Marc Bertolasco, Crashaw and the Baroque (Madison, Wis., 1971), ch. 1.

41

The Meditative Poem, ed. Martz, p.280 n.

42

Broadbent, "The Nativity Ode", pp. 12-13.; L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, pp. 163-165.

43

Kerby Neill, "Structure and Symbol in Crashaw's 'Hymn on the Nativity'", PMLA, LXIII (1948), 101-113; G. Williamson, Six Metaphysical Poets, p. 135.

44

Crashaw, "In the Holy Nativity" (1648), Poems, ed. Martin, p. 250.

45

Crashaw, "A Hymne of the Nativity, sung as by the Shepheards" (1646), Poems, ed. Martin, p. 107. (Original version cited below)

The Babe no sooner 'gan to seeke,
Where to lay his lovely head,
But streight his eyes advis'd his Cheeke,
'Twixt Mothers Brest to goe to bed.
Sweet choise (said I), no way but so,
Not to lye cold, yet sleepe in snow.

46

See Neill, "Structure and Symbol in Crashaw's Hymn", pp. 111-113, for an explanation of the importance of this deletion in Crashaw's shifting of the poem's emphasis from praise of Mary to Christ. (Deleted stanza from 1646 version cited below)

Shee sings thy Teares asleepe, and dips
Her kisses in thy weeping Eye,
She spreads the red leaves of thy Lips,
That in their Buds yet blushing lye.
Shee 'gainst those Mother-Diamonds tryes
The points of her young Eagles Eyes.

47

The Works of Francis Thompson, ed. R.A. Shepherd (London, 1913), vol. III, p. 9.

48

Wallerstein, Richard Crashaw: A Study in Style and Poetic Development, p. 57.

49

Williamson, Six Metaphysical Poets, pp. 133-136.

50

For printing of epigram and its relation to the "Hymn" see Williamson, Six Metaphysical Poets, p. 106, p. 51 n.

51

F. Warnke notes that Crashaw is unlike any other English Metaphysical poet in that the "ritual worshipper" at the center of his poems has no personality. See his edition of European Metaphysical Poetry (New Haven, 1961), p. 82.

52

I have used the first and last Nativity poems covered in this chapter to determine the general scope of this period-- Donne's "La Corona" (1609) and Vaughan's "Christs Nativity" and "The Search" (1650).

- 53
J.B. Broadbent, "The Nativity Ode", The Living Milton, ed. F. Ker-mode (New York, 1960), pp. 12-41.
- 54
G. Ebeling, Word and Faith, p. 84.
- 55
William Haller, The Rise of Puritanism (New York, 1938), p. 269.
- 56
John Milton, "Animadversions", The Works of John Milton, ed. A. Livingstone, W. Trent, C. Knapp, T. Mabbotts (New York, 1931), vol. III, p. 156.
- 57
Milton, "Reason of Church Government", Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. M. Hughes (New York, 1957), pp. 684-685. All subsequent references to Milton's prose or verse derives from this edition.
- 58
The best summary of the background sources of the poem and the critical works which deal with them, see B. Rajan, The Lofty Rhyme (Coral Gables, Fla., 1970), pp. 12-20.
- 59
For a full discussion of Milton's light symbolism in the poem see A. Cook, "Notes on Milton's Nativity Ode" cited elsewhere; see also M. Hughes, Ten Perspectives on Milton (New Haven, 1965), pp. 63 ff. For the symbol of music, see A. Barker, "The Pattern of Milton's 'Nativity Ode'", UTQ, X (1941), 167-181; for the legend of the Four Daughters of God and Milton's inheritance from Fletcher, see J.H. Hanford, A Milton Handbook (New York, 1961), rev.ed., p. 142.
- 60
For the best background information relating the development of the doctrine of the Incarnation to church history, see Œl'Enfance de Jesus", Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, cited previously. See also G. Aulen, Christus Victor, pp. 16-60, 81-122.
- 61
For a discussion of the "Ode" as a Horatian Ode, see M. Nicolson, John Milton: A Reader's Guide to his Poetry (New York, 1971), pp. 32-33; For the work as a Pindaric Ode, see G. Highet, The Classical Tradition (New York, 1957), repr., p. 257; For the "Ode" as a liturgical hymn, see R. Tuve, Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 42-45.
- 62
R. Tuve, Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton, pp. 39 ff.; A. Barker, "The Pattern of Milton's 'Nativity Ode'", p. 179; G.A. Patri-des, Milton and the Christian Tradition (New York, 1966), pp. 146 ff; 260 ff.

63

J.B. Broadbent, "The Nativity Ode", pp. 27-38.

64

Michael Fixler, Milton and the Kingdoms of God (Great Britain, 1964), pp. 54-55; See also W. Grace, Ideas in Milton (Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 39-44.

65

John Milton, "Elegia Sexta", Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Hughes, p. 50. For a discussion of Milton's "Ode" as declaration of craft as a Puritan poet, see A.S.P. Woodhouse, The Heavenly Muse, ed. H. McCallum, Department of English Studies and Texts, vol. 21 (Toronto, 1972), pp. 34-38.

66

C. A. Patrides, Milton and the Christian Tradition, p. 259.

67

Fixler, Milton and the Kingdoms of God, pp. 13-45; 98-101. E.L. Tuveson, Millenium and Utopia (New York, 1964), pp. 1-70.

68

See A. Barker, note 8 above.

69

Milton, "Reason of Church Government", Complete Poetry and Major Prose, ed. Hughes, p. 652.

70

Ibid., p. 671; p. 179 f.

71

Compare Milton's description of the Son as primary agent of God (De Doctrina Christiana, I, 5, and 15) with Calvin's view of Christ as prophet, priest and king (Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. J.T. McNeill (Phila., 1967), II, xv). Milton's remote and abstract Christ was in line with general Puritan thought: see W. Haller, The Rise of Puritanism, pp. 151 ff; M. Ross, "Milton and the Puritan Aesthetic", UTQ, XVIII (1947-1948), 351. See also D. Wolfe's criticism that Milton's Christ did not support, however, the more tender Christ of the Puritan revolutionaries, Milton in the Puritan Revolution (New York, 1941), pp. 346-349.

72

Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", Complete Poetry and Major Prose, ed. Hughes, pp. 42-49.

73

Milton, Paradise Lost, Complete Poetry and Major Prose, ed. Hughes, pp. 211-470.

74

Haller, The Rise of Puritanism, p. 151.

75

For Calvin's interpretation of the Eucharist and Harrowing of Hell, see Institutes, IX, xiv, 14-15; II, xvi, 8-12.

The saga of warfare between Christ and Satan in hell was used extensively by Puritan preachers as a symbol for moral struggle. Note William Perkins, "The Combate between Christ and the Devill Expounded", The Works of William Perkins (Cambridge, 1609), III, pp. 371-408; Thomas Taylor, Christs Combate and Conquest (London, 1648), pp. 20-38.

76

See M. Knappen's discussion of the controversy over the notion of the Incarnation among Dissenters such as the Anabaptists and Family of Love. Tudor Puritanism (Chicago, 1965), rev.ed., pp. 370 ff.

77

For Calvin's de-emphasis on the Passion and emphasis on the Incarnation and Christ's divinity, see Sermon on Daniel, VIII, 16-27; Institutes, L, xiii, 11-13; III, xi, 1. See also F. Wendel, Calvin: The Origin and Development of his Religious Thought (New York, 1963), pp. 225 ff.

78

Calvin, Institutes, II, xii, 14; Wendel, Calvin, pp. 219 ff.

79

W. Grace, Ideas in Milton, p. 52.

80

E.A. Dowe, The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Thought (New York, 1952), pp. 55 ff.

81

For Biblical sources of the war in heaven, see Luke 10:18; for Satan's fall, Isaiah 14 (fall of Babylonian king). The early church applied these texts to Lucifer's fall, see A Catholic Dictionary, ed. D. Attwater, (New York, 1949), p. 299.

For Patristic notions of the redemption in terms of Christ's battle with the devil, see R. Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences on the Dream of the Rood", MAE, XXVII (1958), 137-153.

82

B. Rajan, The Lofty Rhyme, p. 21.

83

M. Gough, The Origins of Christian Art, pp. 18; 86-92.

84

R. Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages, p. 11.

85

Richard Rodgers and Samuel Ward, Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries, ed. M. Knappen (Gloucester, Mass., 1966), pp. 14-15; 68 ff.

86

Milton, "Reason of Church Government", Complete Poetry and Major Prose, ed. Hughes, p. 642.

87

Joan Bennett, Four Metaphysical Poets (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), ch. 5. E.C. Pettet, Of Paradise and Light (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), ch.3.

88

F. Kermode, "The Private Imagery of Henry Vaughan", RES, N.S., I (1950), 206-225; Helen White, The Metaphysical Poets (New York, 1962), repr., pp. 264 ff.; L. Martz, The Paradise Within (New Haven, 1964), pp. 17 ff.

89

G.B. Christopher, "In Arcadia, Calvin: A Study of Nature in Henry Vaughan", SP, 70 (1972), 408-426.

90

For a discussion of Vaughan's use of the Christus Victor theme to display a virulent anti-Puritanism in poems like "Man of War", "The Day of Judgment", "Corruption", see James Simmonds, Masques of God: Form and Theme in the Poetry of Henry Vaughan (Pittsburgh, 1972), pp. 114 ff.

91

For a good summary of the writings of continental enthusiasts and medieval mystics translated into the vernacular by 1640 and their influence on radical Puritan preachers, see W. Haller, The Rise of Puritanism, (New York, 1938), pp. 207 ff.

92

See M. M. Mahood's discussion of Thomas Vaughan's use of the Johannine sperma in Poetry and Humanism (New York, 1950), p. 282.

For a background of the Stoic origin of the concept of seminal logoi, see A.H. Armstrong, An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy (Boston, 1965), repr., pp. 124-125.

93

Henry Vaughan, "Quicknesse", The Works of Henry Vaughan, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford, 1957), 2nd ed., p. 538.

All references to Vaughan's poem derive from Martin's edition.

94

Passage from Thomas Vaughan quoted in E.C. Pettet, Of Paradise and Light, p. 36.

95

Vaughan, "Christ's Nativity", Works, p. 443.

96

Vaughan, "The Shepherds", Works, p. 470.

97

George Herbert, "The Search", The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 162.

98

Henry Vaughan, "The Search", Works, p. 405.

99

L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, pp. 86 ff.

100

"Now call to mind, my sinfull soule, how the firmament was darkened, the Sunne eclipsed and his beames obscured at the bitter Passion of thy Saviour...But now, cease thou my soule, to behold the darkened sun with thine eyes, and attend to the voice of thy crying Saviour with thine attentive eares. What mournful tongue can utter the sharpness of his agonie? What thought can conceive the greatnesse of his paine?" Tr. by "W.F.", Saint Bernard, his Meditations or Sighes, Sobbes and Teares upon our Saviours Passion (London, 1631), pp. 360-361.

101

Compare Vaughan's "The Search" with the more successful "search" for the deity in a medieval poem in which Christ seeks devot, not vice-versa. English Lyrics of the 13th Century, ed. C. Brown (Oxford, 1970), 1st publ. 1932, no. 54.

102

L. Martz, The Paradise Within, pp. 18-30.

Martz states that "Augustinian meditation" and its use of memory is a Platonic concept. Yet my research suggests quite a different conclusion. To my mind, Augustine's use of memory is substantially different from the mechanical anamnesis of Plato's Timaeus, superficial recollection quickly superceded in Plato's thought by the will which drives man to union with the divine. Augustine alters memory's subservience to the will by re-structuring the mind in terms of the trinity. Memory is raised from the animal to the intellectual soul and the human mind becomes a unity with trinitarian form and function. Although Augustine recognizes the primacy of the will, memory is granted a power of its own: it is like our notion of "subconscious" containing the innate ideas of God (memoria Dei), the accumulative self-image or historical identity (memoria sui). See Augustine, "De Trinitate", Later Works, ed. J. Burnaby (Philadelphia, 1955), pp. 18 ff.

103

Rather than a formal category of "meditation", to my mind, Augustine's and Vaughan's works may possibly point to a method universal in literature. I have discovered other works from other cultures and time periods which exhibit the same structural features of digression, repetition, lack of narrative or character development and consistency. See, for example, the 10th century Japanese work by Lady Murasaki, The Tale of Genji and Lawrence Durrell's 20th century novels known as The Alexandria Quartets.

104

Compare the similarities in phrasing, theme, setting and characters in Herbert's "Christmas" and Vaughan's "The Shepherds", "The Incarnation and the Passion", "The Search."

105

Augustine, Later Works, ed. Burnaby, pp. 113 ff.

106

Richard Baxter, The Saints Everlasting Rest (London, 1650), pp. 694-695.

107

Ibid., pp. 6, 14-16. See also his description of Christ the Lodestone, drawing passive man to himself, p. 37.

108

Ibid., p. 35.

109

Ibid., pp. 17, 27-28.

110

Ibid., pp. 695-696.

111

Ibid., pp. 18, 388-391.

112

Vaughan, "Retreate", Works, ed. Martin, p. 419.

Epilogue

This study has focused mainly on the Nativity theme's evolution from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance, the periods in which the birth of Christ was a motif central to poetic, religious and cultural expression in England. Yet the history of the theme by no means terminates with the close of the 17th century. After its ascension out of late medieval popular piety into a century of spectacular belletristic Nativity verse in the late Renaissance, there follows a long attenuation of the theme from the 18th century to the present. The theme's decline in English poetry is concomitant with the attenuation of literal belief in the Scriptures and the parallel growth of scientific and secular philosophies.¹ The result of what Marjorie Nicolson describes as the "breaking of the circle" or the splintering of the ordered, theocentric Christian universe during the 17th century is most keenly revealed in the devotional poems of these last three centuries; Nativity verse during this period seems to be a particularly sensitive "barometer" measuring contemporary society's gradual and deepening dislocation from its past Scriptural tradition. In this epilogue, I would like briefly to explore the purpose and direction taken by post-Renaissance poets writing on the Nativity and to suggest broadly how the fundamental constituents of the poetic theme that I have traced in previous chapters -- the image of Christ, the Scriptural outlines of the birth-episode, the role of the poet-dévot -- have altered in modern times.

The tracing of the Nativity theme after the close of the Renaissance reveals a profound shift in poetic and religious sensibilities, especially as I have noted in my preface, with regard to popular and artistic attitudes toward the Scriptures. A "tonic" Biblical note appears to persist

in post-Renaissance Nativity poems. Yet most interpretations of the theme range widely from its Scriptural substructure and exemplify the skepticism, secularism and isolation of modern man. The variations on the basic Scriptural foundation of the theme can be charted in the following historical fashion: as I have elsewhere noted, the Middle Ages were characterized by their "exegetical" use of the Nativity theme. That is, the medieval "clerc," under the influence of the Biblicism of late medieval monasticism, lifted the Gospel Nativity stories directly into his poetry and impersonally rendered the birth episodes through drama or narration, as if reporting the suffering and joy of a real infant and mother. In the Medieval period, the naturalistic view of the Nativity fits the penitential theology of the time. In the Renaissance, such a view is an "inconvenient" one, antipathetical to the salient constellation of Protestant theological principles -- the kingship, the transcendence and omnipotence of God and his son. It is in this period of heightened tension between an irreducible fundamental or popular piety and the Christological and redemptive spirit of the Protestant revolution that the most "theological" or systematic, the most artistically complex and rich Nativity poems of literary history are written. Whether the poet be Catholic or Calvinist, his interpretation of the theme is a creative act resolving for himself the ferment of the time. One poet, like Southwell, may aim toward the popular and traditional Catholic symbol of the human Jesus; others, like Milton and Vaughan, may assert Protestant theology's ascendancy over the medieval view. All must grapple with these two contending principles inherent in the Renaissance Nativity theme.

Yet after the 17th century, the symbol of the Nativity ceases to be revalued by poets or theologians. It is neither in conflict with nor in

sympathy with a theological world-view. Theology is rather contending with reason and natural science over different ground. In the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, the Nativity is neither a significant image for the "clockmaker" universe, nor for secular philosophies like Darwinism. Nor has there since been any significant reevaluation of the meaning of the Nativity within the contemporary Christian community. Other images seem more paramount to the modern Christian mind -- Christ's work in the world, his death, his Resurrection.² One can describe the history of the theme from the 18th century to the present as a protracted period of "deliquescence" or shrinkage, or as a decided movement away from the commonly understood and accepted formulae set forth by medieval and Renaissance poetic interpretations of the Scriptural birth.

The Middle Ages, then, were "exegetical" and didactic in their careful and realistic reproductions of the Scriptural Nativity records; the Renaissance offered learned, "theological" and imaginative literary expansions of the same Scriptural material. It remains for these last three centuries of our study to discard or to ignore traditional Christian doctrine (except in the case of modern imitations of older Nativity poems, as in Christina Rossetti's "A Christmas Carol") and to treat Scriptural poetic themes "experientially" or as the province of individual artistic expression. What is most remarkable in this period is the association of the Nativity theme with secular areas such as politics, culture and psychology, a movement exemplary of the unwieldy, shifting grounds of devotional verse. In Coleridge's "A Christmas Carol," for example, the Nativity becomes an exemplum of European political stability because of Christ's title "Prince of Peace;" in Swinburne's "A Christmas Carol," the theme becomes identified with an Edwardian eroticism and decadence. The theme

has moved in the last three centuries so far from its original Biblical foundations that it is no longer defined in literature by recognizable public symbols and images or by general religious or literary "trends," but by the multiplicity of sub-themes, the variety and the privateness of the treatments and the paucity of poems on the subject.

The undermining of the "truth" of Scripture is initiated in the Age of Reason, when the absolute historicity of Biblical stories surrounding the life of Christ is attacked by the English deists.³ The output of works by 18th century religious poets is prodigious; most notable of all is the achievement of the evangelical hymn-writers whose works constitute the core of Protestant hymnography. Yet as William B. Morris notes, the religious verse of this century is markedly different from the devotional poetry previous and subsequent to it. Morris finds the Christian tradition and the Scriptures displaced from its former central position in devotional verse and coerced into the service of "sublimity," that is, imaginative literary flights in imitation of what 18th century poets viewed as "Miltonic."⁴ Morris' work illustrates from a literary perspective the overall usurpation of theology's hold over the believing community by reason and imagination. Certainly, Morris' notion of literary "sublimity" is a useful concept allowing us to assess the distinct achievement of poets like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley without necessarily comparing them to devotional poets of a different order, such as Donne, Herbert or Milton. In addition, Morris makes the interesting suggestion that the 19th century pantheistic and transcendental poets may well have been heralded in part by the 18th century religious writers whose works emphasized imagination and sensibility over dogma.

Except for the presence of the idiosyncratic Christopher Smart,

whose excellent, emblematically complex "Hymn on the Nativity" constitutes an unique throwback to the more mystical, Scripturally oriented poems of the Renaissance, most of the religious verse of this century fall into two general categories, both of which attempt the literary effect of sublimity rather than the dissemination and embodiment of Christian doctrine. The imaginative, philosophical works of a poet like Pope lie outside our study of Nativity poems since they do not deal with a Biblical topic like the Nativity. However, the many Scriptural paraphrases undertaken by Protestant hymnographers of this century do indicate the general trend among religious poets of this time to sentimentalize the Scriptures and to use them as subject matter for imaginative excursions into the realm of the sublime.

Isaac Watt's "A Cradle Hymn" is one of the more expressive Protestant hymns. The work transposes the Nativity scene in Luke to the more mundane encounter between human mother and child; the Scriptural Nativity remains a vague backdrop against which the mortal figures move. Yet in the poet's attempt to transform the Biblical cradle scene into an appreciation of the awesome worth of nature, "A Cradle Hymn" becomes an example of the transition of dogma into evangelical cliché, into something pious and mysterious but no longer symbolically significant or Scripturally accurate.

...Mayst thou live to know and fear him,
 Trust and love him all thy days!
 Then go dwell forever near him,
 See his face, and sing his praise!...⁵

In a sense, the "Golden Age" of Protestant hymnography did much to diminish the uniqueness and power of devotional verse by sentimentalizing and formalizing the Scriptural stories and by suggesting that Biblical themes were abstractions endorsing the poet's attempt to envision or apprehend

the "sublime."

Nativity verse, embodying the authority of the Scriptures, is conspicuously absent in the 19th century when secular doctrines like Darwinism or the various utopian or materialistic schools of thought relating to social or biological determinism begin to undermine the hold of Christian doctrine over the literary artist and his reading public. In the opening lines of Blake's Europe, a passage which parodies Milton's "Nativity Ode,"⁷ and in Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," there are references to symbols or images occurring in other, earlier Nativity poems. Yet these references are employed to support and to explore the concept of human advancement, a credo which ignores the intermediary figure of Jesus Christ for its notion of human perfection. Blake's passage in Europe, for example, describes the Newborn Orc, one of Blake's many ambivalent heroes who perform Christ's will, although they do not share his perfection. Here, Blake's non-Christian private notion of "nativity," a formerly religious symbol is coerced into secular service: Orc becomes an awesome being initiating a cycle of social revolution and unleashed a destructive yet liberating political force in human history.⁸

The deep of winter came:
 What time the secret child
 Descended thro' the orient gates of the eternal day.
 War ceas'd, & all the troops like shadows fled
 To their abodes...
 Arise O Orc from thy deep den!
 First born of Enitharmon rise!
 And we will crown thy head with garlands of the ruddy vine:
 For now thou art bound:
 And I may see thee in the hour of bliss, my eldest born.
 Whirling about in furious circles round the immortal fiend. (ll. 1-11)⁹

Like Blake's passage on the terrible birth of Orc, Wordsworth's paean to human childhood is obviously not a Christian work and makes no direct reference to the Christian Nativity. Yet it marks, to my mind, the extreme

degree to which traditional religious symbols like Christ's Nativity had been translated into human, secular terms. In Wordsworth's "Ode," there are familiar clusters of pastoral and maternal images (lamb, fountain, shepherd, lullaby scene) which seems to me to bear conventional public association relating to the Gospel birth. Yet in the context of the work itself, pastoral references once again relate to utopian, agrarian concepts, as they did in the Greek pastoral, rather than serve as hieroglyphs for a heavenly order; Wordsworth's pastoral-maternal image clusters are meant, then, purely as idealized and denotative descriptions of a private vision of human paradise. The secularization of the Nativity theme is underscored further by Wordsworth's use of human birth as a measure evaluating the sacredness of subjective human existence,¹⁰ a function that had been served in medieval and Renaissance times by the many meditations on the birth, life and death of Christ.

Devotional poetry is at a virtual standstill in the 19th century, and Scriptural Nativity verse is markedly scarce. Aside from the non-Christian "nativity" works of Blake and Wordsworth, a small handful of 19th century works employ random Christian Nativity references and appear to foreshadow the more diverse and private treatments of the theme in the following century: the Christmas lyrics in Tennyson's In Memoriam link the Nativity not with the traditional notion of cosmic rebirth but with the more particular and private rebirth of hope in Tennyson's own life after a long period of grief over Arthur Hallam's death.¹¹ The theme has faded into a literal, everyday image of ringing bells, one devoid of public religious symbolism although an important Tennysonian image.¹²

The time draws near the birth of Christ;
 The moon is hid, the night is still;
 A single church below the hill
 Is pealing, folded in the mist.

A single peal of bells below,
That wakens at this hour of rest
A single murmur in the breast,
That these are not the bells I know.

Like strangers' voices here they sound,
In lands where not a memory strays,
Nor landmark breathes of other days,
But all is new unhallow'd ground...

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die... (CIV-CVI)¹³

Swinburne's "synthetic" pre-Raphaelite Nativity ballad, "A Christmas Carol" attempts to impose the legend of the pregnant Mary and jealous Joseph out of the Apocrypha into a pseudo-Arthurian plot of marital betrayal, an attempt which entirely negates the Scriptural elements in the poem.¹⁴ Rather than adopting the religious ballad's didactic, ethical point of view, as in the "Cherry Tree Carol," Swinburne's work takes on a contemporary amorality and eroticism.

Three damsels in the queen's chamber
The queen's mouth was most fair;
She spake the word of God's mother
As the combs went in her hair.
Mary that is of might
Bring us to thy Son's sight.

They held the gold combs out from her
A span's length from her head;
She sang this song of God's mother
And of her bearing-bed.
Mary most full of grace,
Bring us to thy Son's face.

When she sat at Joseph's head,
She looked against her side;
And either way from the short silk band
Her girdle was all wried;
Mary that all good may,
Bring us to thy Son's way.

Mary had three women for her bed,
And twain were maidens clean;
The first of them had white and red,
The third had riven green.

Mary that is so sweet,
 Bring us to thy Son's feet... (ll. 1-16)¹⁵

Both of the above examples show the unmistakable dispersion of the Scriptural Nativity theme into channels far removed from Christian doctrine.

The first major poet to re-establish a significant devotional context for traditional Biblical themes is the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. His works properly belong to the mid-19th century; yet, like Smart, his fresh, lively personal engagement with religious dogma makes him an historical aberration. A full treatment of Hopkins is impossible in this epilogue, since, strictly speaking, the Nativity theme does not appear to be congenial to Hopkins' notion of Christ as glorious martyr. It is the Passion which primarily inspires him. Then too, Hopkins' Christ is not the sharply drawn character of the Christian poetic tradition, but a faceless abstraction fused with private symbols drawn from nature ("The Windhover") or a historical force hidden in contemporary events ("The Wreck of the Deutschland"). In spite of the fact that his works lie outside my study, Hopkins is yet a crucial figure whose place in the history of English religious verse cannot go unnoticed. He is the finest religious poet since the 17th century as well as an important herald of the more doctrinal and theological works of modern Nativity poets like T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, with whom my study concludes.

In the 20th century, along with a general reawakening of Biblical scholarship in theological circles, there is a considerable stirring of artistic interest in Scriptural themes like the Nativity. This century is a unique period in devotional literary history, for it attempts the enormously difficult task of revivifying past Christian poetic tradition while re-ordering the secular, man-centered doctrines of the 19th century poets. The surprising return in the 20th century to literal Biblical

themes as the matter for many of the modern poet's art is heralded in part by the flourishing of Biblical studies under the aegis of contemporary theologians and historians like Albert Schweitzer, Rudolph Bultmann and Hans Conzelmann, who have sought to make relevant the person of the "historical" Jesus, the man Jesus, purified of legend and church tradition. Yet in contemporary poetic works treating the Scriptural Nativity theme, traditional literary motifs relating to the birth of Christ are radically repositioned, for again, it is the experience of the individual poet rather than the substance of Christian doctrine or poetic tradition which governs the creation of the work. In the Nativity poems of Allen Tate, Edith Sitwell, T. S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, Scriptural material is neither offered literally, as in the Middle Ages, nor is given theological expansion, as in the 16th and 17th centuries. The contemporary Nativity poet discards the task of teaching doctrine or communicating a communally understood spiritual experience. Instead he speaks in his own voice, or through various personae, to contemporary secular issues or to private spiritual concerns.

Tate, Sitwell, Eliot and Auden seek to make relevant the old Scriptural themes treated by earlier devotional poets, but they are forced to confront a public for whom the vocabulary of old Christian symbols has largely been lost. Or, the symbols are commonly known but lacking in cultural force. In the Nativity poems of these authors, some measure of the Scriptural poetic past is retrieved and attempts are made to invest the attenuated religious theme with the renewed mystery and passion of a cultural, if not religious, myth. Yet the poetic results are amazingly dissimilar and revealing of the unique and private perceptions that govern the creation of each separate Nativity work.

In all of these works, devotional poetic tradition must be re-shaped

to accommodate a contemporary relevance. Both Allen Tate and Edith Sitwell, in manipulating poetic tradition, chastise a society made morally weak by global war and describe modern man in Heidegger's terms as "a being toward death." Similarly, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden retrieve the Gospel foundations of the Nativity theme by returning in their Nativity poems to the Scriptural birth accounts to affirm and bemoan a cultural and moral aridity in society. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and its companion piece "A Song for Simeon," is further shaped by the Christmas liturgy,¹⁶ and Auden's "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" appears to imitate the characterizations and nine-part episodic structure of the medieval Nativity drama.

The variations played upon the theme and its deeply private expressions seem to indicate to me that in the 20th century we are no longer witnessing the creation of devotional poetry as defined in my previous chapters; that is to say, as didactic verse espousing Scriptural themes or communally accepted spiritual insights and values. More and more significant in these contemporary Nativity works is the role of the poet himself, not precisely as dévot but as critic or seer. It is the "who" and the "how," the author himself, his tone and his multi-faceted poetic personae which determine the shape of the poem, more than the "what" or the matter itself. Formerly in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the devotional poem was an experience shared by poet and audience and based upon a common understanding and belief in the Bible. Yet with the erosion of popular faith in religious absolutes, the dynamic between poet, audience and doctrine itself is undermined. Here in the age of Eliot and Auden, all meaning becomes filtered through the mind of the poet himself whose "credo" or personal system of belief is confronted as a challenge by the reader. The modern devotional

poet's message, however, is not solely an artistic one, for poetic tradition and religious symbol cannot wholly be discarded, no matter how much they have been exhausted. In these contemporary Nativity poems, the poet appears to adopt a prophetic, irenic or argumentative stance, calling for a return to a religious rather than a scientific or materialistic consciousness, and urging a re-acquaintance with now indistinct religious symbols as the means by which mankind can redirect and redeem its existence.

Although the 20th century Nativity poem is essentially a very personal vision of the poet, its message has yet become much more general and social, and less bound to a specific message authorized by the Scriptures as compared to earlier examples of Nativity verse. The appeal in present-day Nativity works is not from the artist in a community to the ordinary dévot within it, but from one solitary individual to another, using signs which must be recognizable to all men of whatever religious or secular persuasion. The poet must deal now with the fact that Christianity has become only one of many contending philosophies; its symbols are known, but the poet must re-assert their relevancy in order to maintain their validity and viability in his poetry. He must also recognize in dealing with Scriptural themes and symbols that the province of the human has taken enormous precedence over the divine. The Nativity, then, is in these modern Nativity poems no longer a religious symbol evoking divine concerns, but a cultural one reflecting the more immediate anomie of a secular age, or what the 20th century theologian Nathan Scott describes as "a great impoverishment of the human spirit, resulting in a general banalization of the world and experience."¹⁷

The same "impoverishment" of vision that Scott alludes to is clearly bemoaned in the most important 20th century Nativity poems; in their unabated

peppiness and ennui, they are worlds apart from the joyful or bittersweet world of the medieval Nativity carol or the rhapsodic Renaissance devotional lyric. Tate's and Sitwell's works are exceedingly bitter and employ Nativity themes to explore the secular notions of human depravity and social corruption. In Tate's second Christmas sonnet-cycle, More Sonnets at Christmas, Tate's virulent hatred of World War II is developed. In one sonnet, the Nativity is trivialized, or in Scott's term, "banalized" by using a boring Christmas revel to illustrate the materialism of war-time Britain.

The day's at end, and there's nowhere to go,
 Draw to the fire, even this fire is dying;
 Get up and once again politely lying
 Invite the ladies to the mistletoe
 With greedy eyes that stare like an old crow.

How pleasantly the holly wreaths did hang
 And how stuffed Santa did his reindeer clang
 Above the golden oaken mantel, years ago!

Then hang this picture for a calendar,
 As sheep for goats, and pray most fixedly
 For the cold martial progress of your star,
 With thoughts of commerce and society,
 Well-milked Chinese, Negroes who cannot sing
 The Huns gelded and feeding in a ring.¹⁶

Like Tate, Edith Sitwell declaims against the moral emptiness of a society at war. In chastising its self-destructive values, she mocks the old religious symbols themselves. "Still Falls the Rain" and its appended "Lullaby" is a grisly parody of the tradition of Nativity lullabies, exploring the very real human suffering and despair in London during the blitz.

Though the world has slipped and gone,
 Sounds my loud discordant cry
 Like the steel birds' song on high,
 'Still one thing is left -- the Bone!
 The out danced the Babioun.

She sat in the hollow of the sea --
 A socket whence the eyes put out --
 She sang to the child a lullaby
 (The steel bird's nest was thereabout.)

Do, do, do, do --
 Thy mother's hied to the vaster race:
 The Pterodactyl made its nest
 And laid the steel egg in her breast --

Under the Judas-colored sun,
 She'll work no more, nor dance, nor moan,
 And I am come to take her place,
 Do, do...

Red is the bed of Poland, Spain,
 And th mother's breast, who has grown wise
 In that fouled nest, if she could rise,
 Give birth again...¹⁹

Like Sitwell's and Tate's Nativity verses, the personal and social nature of T. S. Eliot's and W. H. Auden's Nativity works is enormously apparent in that each uses their private view of the birth as the determinant for the quality of modern culture and morality. Yet their works are more complicated than Tate's or Sitwell's in that they attempt, in addition to social criticism, the revitalization of Scriptural themes and symbols. Artistically and technically, they are also the most complex of the contemporary Nativity works. Where Tate and Sitwell employ the more simple techniques by which tone and persona is manipulated -- parody and irony -- Eliot and especially Auden in addition to these use a variety of "contrapuntal" dramatic and tonal devices. The contemporary reader is coerced into accepting a revived notion of the Incarnation through satire, burlesque, invective, multiple ironic masks and dissociative time schemes depicting the paradoxical quality of modern life and the continuing and saving reciprocity of present history with its religious past.

Yet in spite of the neo-traditional Biblicism of Eliot and Auden, their works are radically different from earlier Nativity works. The Gospel stories no longer offer a speculum vitae Christi or a vision of a historic event in Christ's life sacred in itself and mirroring the ideal course of human events. Rather, the reverse is true: it occurs to me

that the Gospel stories serve primarily as myths for the modern human condition, especially for man's search for religious truth in a disordered, incomprehensible world. In T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," for example, the magus appears to exemplify a 20th century, "post-religious" consciousness: he is clearly not the magus of the medieval or Renaissance tradition in poetry and art, the lordly figure who glorifies and worships the babe with much ceremony and deliberation. Rather, he is an image of the modern persona, adept at deciphering scientific evidence, like the physical details of the land through which he journeys; yet he is deeply puzzled by the spiritual or transcendental meaning of Christ's birth and knows not what it portends.²⁰

...Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
 With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
 And three trees in the low sky,
 And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
 Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
 And feet kicking the empty wine skins...

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.²¹

To my mind, Eliot is the one contemporary poet who very nearly transcends the private, despairing vision of the majority of 20th century poets writing on the Nativity theme. This is primarily true in his most mature work, The Four Quartets, whose tone and persona closely approximates that of the formal, direct, omniscient persona of medieval and Renaissance

Nativity poems. Like the traditional dévot, the persona of the Quartets seems to assume as a major task the inconspicuous affirming and interpreting of Christian dogma for the believing community while voicing, as well, Eliot's own private credo.²² By means of Eliot's laconic, analytical persona who appears not to be bound by time or space and who resolves the piety and didacticism of the dévot with the secular, guilt-ridden consciousness of the modern Christian, Eliot is able to synthesize a religious with a post-religious mentality and to restore to traditional religious symbols some semblance of their former symbolic dimension. Nativity symbols and incarnational themes are woven throughout the Quartets, occurring in repetitive images like the rose-garden, which evokes the persona's private vision of paradise²³ as well as the hortus conclusus or enclosed garden and womb of Mary. In the "Dry Salvages" (a section that looks to the Incarnation as formulated by the Catholic liturgy and Renaissance notions of providential history),²⁴ the striking, disembodied image of "soundless wailing" illustrates the anxiety of the modern persona who hears and witnesses the truth but fears that he has "missed the meaning." Yet this contemporary pessimism is balanced by the relation of the image to the grandiose notion of the Verbum Infans, the incarnate and silent Logos of the church Fathers.

Like Eliot, W. H. Auden seeks in his extended Nativity poem, For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio, to return to the original Scriptural foundations of the theme, and, in addition, to recapitulate the episodic structure and characters of the medieval Nativity drama. Of the 20th century Nativity works, Auden's is, to my mind, the most ambitious, yet the most enigmatic and difficult to assess. Although he employs the same technique of social satire and the same eschatological themes as do Sitwell, Tate and Eliot, Auden's work appears more fragmented and inconclusive than

the others. His work takes on the same large scope as Eliot's Quartets, but lacks the deliberate and synthetic devotional statement of Eliot's work.

The technical artistry of For the Time Being is unquestioned. Paradoxes and contrasting scenes and personae abound in the work and are used skillfully to fuse or to contrast the modern experience with the original Bethlehem Nativity. Yet these ironic juxtapositions appear to reflect a personal discomfort with the role of dévot. Auden declared himself ill at ease with poets like Donne or Hopkins who attempt a personal communion with the deity;²⁵ thus Auden's Christianity was for a time attacked by his contemporaries. That Auden's devotionalism was indeed real and artistically successful is attested to by Richard Ohmann who asserts that the vaudevillian mixtures of styles and forms in a work like For the Time Being serves to shock the modern reader into an attitude of "sacred awe" where brief and general contact with the divine is made.²⁶

Miriam Starkman, in a recent and substantial treatment of Auden's Nativity poem, however, defines his task as poet-dévot as something far different than the attempt to achieve a vague sublimity, as Ohmann would suggest. Rather, Starkman argues that the dogmatic tradition underlying the work is given shape and force by Auden's well-known existentialism. Using a device that Starkman terms "telescopic anachronism," Auden so arranges scenes and draws characters (such as Joseph or Herod) that they are theologically and Scripturally accurate as well as illustrative of the absurd qualities in contemporary existence. Thus the work possesses both the legitimacy of the Christian tradition as well as the earth bound, experiential consciousness of the 20th century. Yet despite the brilliance of its individual sections, Starkman concludes that the work is formally flawed; it

lacks an overall synthesis and a clear motive.²⁷

Starkman's evaluation of the fundamental role that existentialism plays in both shaping and "complicating" Auden's devotionism suggests to me a continuing antagonism within the poem between the varying poles of Auden's faith. Although orthodoxy and existentialism provided for unusually rich portrayals of characters; for moving passages which come close to traditional poetic devotion (notably the lyrical Annunciation, pastoral and lullaby sections), for dialectically brilliant prose passages which offer acute theological arguments (the Herod and Simeon sections), it seems to me that Auden as poet-dévot too often hides behind a smoke-screen of poetic masks and styles. Although he does remarkably well with documenting the existential themes of anxiety and despair, I find ultimately dissatisfying his inability to offer a cohesive devotional statement regarding the Nativity. The final section of the work, spoken by a disembodied Narrator, for example, voices the stoic admonition to the human soul to "endure;" it stops far short of confronting the joy, transcendence or rebirth implicit in the Nativity theme.

Yet Auden's For the Time Being is enormously important in that it emphasizes more than any other 20th century Nativity work the intensely private vision of modern poets writing on the theme. Auden's poem dramatizes the prismatic, discordant quality of the contemporary experience and radically proclaims the validity of the chaos and angst of the modern world.

What all these modern poets we have treated above have in common is the attempt to re-mythify the Nativity theme, to render it strange and powerful, in order to re-assert a metaphysical or religious view of the universe. The theme, itself, under the neo-Biblicism of Eliot and Auden, attains some of its former potency, yet the finer points of Nativity

doctrine, legend or characterization are obscured in favor of a generalized sense of communion with the deity or of profound despair at the modern condition. All these Nativity poems seem to show that in this century, the Nativity theme draws its validity not solely from doctrine or Scripture, but from the personal outlook of the poet. In the absence of dogma, the modern poet intensifies his idiom in order to confirm the truth of his private vision.

Obviously, the post-Renaissance Nativity poems I have just examined all too frequently wander far afield from the original Scriptural basis of the theme. Yet the presence of these poems in literary history seems to me to confirm the continuing richness and variety of the theme in literature, its remarkable flexibility and ability to unite with divergent secular philosophies and its chameleon-like facility in assuming and embodying the distinguishing poetic and spiritual characteristics of each separate age.

Notes to Epilogue

¹For a historical overview of the process of the erosion of belief in the Bible, see Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia, 1963), pp. 305-311.

²Ibid., pp. 288-304.

³The immensely popular 18th century tract by the eccentric English Deist Thomas Woolston attacked the activities of a "villainous" historical Jesus. See Peter Gay's investigation of Woolston's Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Saviour (1727) in Deism (Princeton, 1968), pp. 122-139. For other good analyses of the undermining of Christian "miracles" like the Nativity, see Peter Gay, The Enlightenment (New York, 1966), pp. 371-419; Sir Leslie Stephen, History of English Thought in the 18th Century (New York, 1962), 1st publ. 1876, vol. I, pp. 62-75.

⁴David B. Morris, The Religious Sublime (Lexington, 1972), pp. 62, 131 ff.

⁵Isaac Watts, "A Cradle Hymn," Eighteenth Century Poetry and Prose, ed. Bredvold and McKillop (New York, 1956), pp. 507-508.

⁶For a discussion of the congregational hymn's development out of 18th century formal, commendatory verse, see Routley, The English Carol (Oxford, 1959), pp. 145 ff.

⁷Michael J. Tolley, "Europe: to those ychained in sleep," Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic, ed. D. Erdman and J. E. Grant (Princeton, 1970).

⁸George Quasha, "Orc as a Fiery Paradigm of Poetic Torsion," Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic, pp. . See also D. Erdman, Blake: Prophet Against Empire (Princeton, 1969), pp. 264-269.

⁹William Blake, "Europe," The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. D. Erdman and H. Bloom (New York, 1965), pp. 60-61.

¹⁰Christopher Salveson suggests that Wordsworth is the first major poet to use subjective rather than allegorical notions of time. See The Landscape of Memory (Lincoln, Neb., 1965), pp. 1-5, 134-135.

¹¹Tennyson himself suggested that the ringing of the Christmas bells in the poem mark the successive stages of emotional maturity in the poet. See Hallam Tennyson, Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1897), vol. I, pp. 304-305.

¹²My own reading of Tennyson's works would suggest that the bell image develops throughout his oeuvre, from a literal reference ("Dora," ll. 38-43) to an ambivalent image denoting the impingement of human attachments and social duty ("Enoch Arden," ll. 507-509; "Morte d'Arthur," ll. 350-354; "Tiresias," ll. 184-187). Finally, the image becomes a private symbol for memories of human contact unmarked by suffering ("In Memoriam: W. G. Ward," "Crossing the Bar").

¹³Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam: The Way of a Soul," The Complete Poetical Works of Tennyson, ed. W. J. Rolfe (Cambridge, 1898), p. 190.

¹⁴Swinburne's interest in the Nativity theme as a literary curiosity is in part inspired by the revival among Victorian ethnologists and philologists of interest in the medieval manuscript carol. From 1850 to 1880, series of expensive collections of medieval poems drawing from carols, broadsides and hymns were published by antiquarians. See W. Schmauch, Christmas Literature through the Ages, pp. 272-273.

¹⁵A. C. Swinburne, "A Christmas Carol," The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne, ed. E. Gosse and T. Wise (New York, 1968), 1st publ. 1925, vol. I, pp. 346-348.

¹⁶Karen Rohmer, "T. S. Eliot and the Language of Liturgy," Renaissance (1972), 24: 119-135.

¹⁷Nathan Scott, The Broken Center, p. 150.

¹⁸Allen Tate, "More Sonnets at Christmas" (1942), Poems: 1922-1947 (New York, 1948), no. 2.

¹⁹Edith Sitwell, "Lullaby," Collected Poems (New York, 1954), repr., pp. 265-268.

²⁰My interpretation of the modernism of T. S. Eliot's persona in this poem runs counter to that of two recent articles on the work: R. D. Brown, "Revelation in T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'", Renaissance (1972), 24: 136-140; Nancy Gish, "The Meaning of the Incarnation in Two 'Ariel Poems'," Michigan Academician, (1972) 6: 59-69.

²¹T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," The Complete Poems and Plays (New York, 1962), pp. 68-69.

²²Professor Helen Gardner praises Eliot for his abandoning of earlier masks and his assumption of a confident and mature persona in the Quartets. See "T. S. Eliot," RES (1971), 2:27-44.

²³For the rose garden as image of Eden, see Elizabeth Drew, T. S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry (New York, 1962), pp. 153 ff. See also Robert Wagner, "The Meaning of Eliot's Rose Garden," FMLA, LXIX (1954), 25-33.

²⁴For a reading of the Quartets in terms of Protestant, redemptive history centered around the Incarnation, see C. A. Patries, "The Renaissance of the Renaissance T. S. Eliot and the Pattern of Time," MQR 12 (1973), 172-196. For the poem as celebration of liturgical feasts, see J. Sexton, "Four Quartets and the Christian Calendar," American Literature, 43 (1971), 279-281.

²⁵For many years the sincerity of Auden's religious commitment was at issue, a debate fostered somewhat by Auden's own cryptic observations: "A poet doesn't have to believe what he says, only to entertain it as a possibility...for in poetry dogma and myth are identical." Quoted in Monroe K. Spears, "The Dominant Symbols in Auden's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LIX (Summer, 1951), p. 29.

Auden's above comment seems to support my contention that the 20th century devotional poet is uneasy with dogma and treats the symbols and themes of Christianity primarily as cultural myth.

²⁶Richard Ohmann, "Auden's Sacred Awe," The Commonweal, LXXVIII (May 31, 1963), 279-281.

²⁷Miriam K. Starkman, "The 'Grace of the Absurd': Form and Concept in Auden's For the Time Being", Harvard Theological Review, 67 (1974), 275-288.

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